

A Speech Act Study of Online Comments towards COVID-19 Report in the Malaysian National Security Council's Official Facebook Page

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ABSTRACT

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The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the world, crippling its economies, impacting the education system, and debilitating emotions and mental health. However, with the emergence of new virus mutations, Malaysia has yet to win the battle against this wave of COVID-19. This has led to diverse reactions among its citizens. We observe that many Malaysians are now flooding their social media platforms to vent their frustration or even blame various parties for this COVID-19 spike in the country. Hence, this study was designed to investigate the speech acts employed by Malaysian Facebook users in constructing their online comments amid the COVID-19 crisis. The study corpus consisted of 555 Facebook comments to daily reports of COVID-19 cases published on the Facebook page of the Malaysian National Security Council in July and August 2021. The entire data was coded using ATLAS.ti version 22. Based on the findings, we discovered that the most frequently constructed speech acts in this study corpus were assertive, followed by expressive and directive, which were addressed to two target recipients: the government and the public. The analysis of this study would enable us to understand the various ways language is used in computer-mediated communication, particularly the types of speech acts used in social media such as Facebook.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the outbreak of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first detected in Wuhan, China (Yang, et al., 2020). From there, it quickly spreads globally, resulting in the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring it a global pandemic (disease transmission among people in many countries and causing death) on March 12, 2020. To date, we can still clearly see the entire world is facing tremendous effects from this deadly pandemic in terms of health, economy, education, tourism, transportation, industry, trade, and the poverty level. With COVID-19 now termed as an endemic and without proper management of this virus, we will keep shouldering its impact, especially on our psychological responses. These psychological responses like fear, anxiety and confusion are key determinants for our outcoming behaviours (Pakpour & Griffith, 2020). Psychological responses might bring in different results in different individuals. For instance, having a low level of anxiety may lead to reluctant prevention behaviours, such as not practising handwashing regularly, whereas having a high level of anxiety may drive people to socially disruptive behaviours like panic buying (Taylor et al., 2020). These two examples of having low and high levels of psychological responses will not benefit us in combating this virus. Recently, we also saw psychological responses being expressed using social media platforms. When the comfort in the company of others is missing due to Movement Control Order (MCO) implemented by the Malaysian government, the role of social media in one's life cannot be underestimated (Hussain, 2020). Some Malaysians vent their psychological responses of anger and frustration towards various parties about COVID-19 through their social media accounts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Social Media*

In Malaysia, social media is used to spread positive and negative messages related to COVID-19. The use of social media amid the COVID-19 pandemic is seen to bring a sense of unity, and at the same time, it may also act as a ground for misinformation and discrimination (Hussain, 2020) if not properly managed. This abundance of data available on social media platforms should be studied, particularly on the language aspects, as we could identify and analyse the use of language in every comment posted online. The essential use of a language is mainly to communicate intended messages to others. The exciting part of a language is not just the message that we want to deliver, but when we communicate, the language that we use is always linked to our individual experiences, such as linguistic attitude, cultural influences, and personal perception (Anyanwu & Abana, 2020). Language too is used to express one's feelings, ideas, and desires (Mutmainnah & Sutopo, 2016). Previously, many language studies have been centralised towards stable concepts, but now we can observe that these concepts are rapidly changing as our lives are shifted to online platforms (Barton & Lee, 2013). When this changing shift occurs, notions of interaction must be reassessed.

2.2 *Speech Acts*

Speech acts are a part of communication and can control the meaning of sentences (Rosyidi et al., 2019). When people communicate using language, utterances will be produced, through which a particular act i.e., speech act is performed (Dylgjeri, 2017). An utterance is a speech analysis unit that can be varied based on the context of communication. When a speaker utters a sentence, there must be a meaning that they want to convey and their intention of saying it. This intention of saying something is known as a speech act. The speech act is commonly used to interpret meaning in a particular context (Yule & Widdowson, 1996). A speech act is an

utterance defined in terms of a speaker's intention and its effect on a listener. Speech act theory was introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969). According to Austin (1962), there are three types of speech acts that utterances are said to perform (refer Table 1).

Table 1 Types of speech acts developed by Austin (1962)

Type	Explanation
Locutionary	The basis of the utterance (what speakers say) / The act of saying something with meaning and truth value
Illocutionary	The intended meaning of what speakers say / The action one performs in saying something
Perlocutionary	The effect of what speakers say / How the speaker tries to affect his listener

This speech act theory perceives utterances as having actions in themselves, which can yield immense effects on the hearers, bringing many changes in us. The three types of speech act portrayed above can be identified in any type of communication, for instance, when the government gives orders to its people or when parents stop children from doing something (Rosyidi et al., 2019). Table 2 shows the five categories of speech acts proposed by Searle (1969).

Table 2 Categories of Speech Acts by Searle's (1969)

Category	Explanation	Example
Assertives	Speakers try to get listeners to form a belief or a specific idea, regardless of its truth	<i>("Out for a while")</i>
Directives	Speakers try to get listeners to do something	Begging, commanding, requesting <i>("Don't forget to turn off your data, #fams".)</i>
Commissives	Speakers commit themselves to a future course of action	Promising, guaranteeing <i>("I want to always do the right thing, even when the right thing is a difficult thing to do".)</i>
Expressives	Speakers express their feelings	Apologising, welcoming, sympathising <i>("I'm soooooooooo happy for u!!!!!!" @.)</i>
Declarations	Speaker's utterance brings about a new external situation	Christening, marrying, resigning, declaring war <i>("You are dead to me".)</i>

In relation to this study, the categories of speech act in CMC will be analysed and identified based on comments made by Malaysians on the Malaysian National Security Council Facebook account. The difference in speech acts found in Malay and English responses will be further studied.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data selection

The study corpus consists of 555 Facebook comments. These were posted as responses to the daily reports of COVID-19 cases (between July and August 2021) on the Facebook page of the Malaysian National Security Council, accessible via the link: <https://www.facebook.com/MKNJPM/>. It is a government agency responsible for the management and coordination of security-related policies, which plays an essential role in managing safety issues affected by COVID-19. During the pandemic, the agency took immediate action to control the virus spread by implementing the standard operating procedure (SOP) in four progressive phases identified as phases one, two, three, and four as part of the

national recovery plan (Majlis Keselamatan Negara, 2021). As a means of communicating with and disseminating information about COVID-19 to the public, the agency fully utilises its Facebook page, followed by over one million followers, by posting current updates about the pandemic on the social networking site. Some of their postings encompassed the latest statistics of cases and rates of infection, recovery, and vaccination.

Data were collected using the purposive sampling method as it was meant to identify information-rich cases for us to derive the answers to our research questions (Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), the purposive sampling strategy should be determined when researchers have done the following: determine inquiry purposes, focus inquiry questions and decide the type of data to collect. Therefore, the researchers selected Facebook comments as the type of (online) data for this study. This was accomplished by conducting the criterion sampling strategy, as the selection criteria were determined before the data collection (Schreier, 2018). Furthermore, the computer-mediated discourse analysis approach underscores that sampling for online discourse is motivated by several aspects rather than carried out randomly (Herring, 2004). Extending the criterion sampling, we also applied the sampling technique proposed by (Herring, 2004), so the data were selected based on the sampling by the theme technique, for example, all messages in a particular thread and time technique or all messages in a specific interval of time. An explanation is provided below on how these were applied in this study.

Every comment was collected using the copy-paste method into a Microsoft Word .doc template purposely created for this study. Initially, our corpus consisted of 570 comments. However, 15 were found irrelevant to the Facebook posts, hence, were deleted from the corpus. In addition, we only selected direct comments for each daily report. Thus, indirect comments were omitted. These indirect comments were primarily sent as replies to the direct comments rather than directly to a post. Hence, the data in our study were limited to those speech acts that occurred in the direct comments only. These 555 comments were written in English and Malay, 32 and 523, respectively. Although there were comments written in a code mix, we categorised them as either English or Malay comments because the code mix excerpts constituted a minimal part of the entire comments. All these did not pose any problems in understanding the comments because both languages are spoken as our native language (Malay) and a second language (English). Hence, it required no translation for the coding purpose.

We coded the data in several rounds by addressing one question at a time using ATLAS.ti version 22 as our main coding software. ATLAS.ti, as a tool for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS), has the main advantage of easing data management and retrieval as opposed to conducting a manual data analysis. As a tool utilised for qualitative data analysis, ATLAS.ti have similar functionalities to other CAQDAS tools (Paulus & Bennett, 2017). Researchers can conduct a single-coder or multi-coder data analysis, create codes using various coding functions depending on researchers' coding purposes (e.g. Open coding, in-vivo coding, quick coding), merge codes, generate code graphs and tables, as well as merge different projects by using the software (Friese, 2012; Hwang, 2008). Although coding can be done manually, we found it easier to use the software to create, delete and merge codes for data analysis. Nevertheless, our primary role in identifying the meanings and determining and applying the codes to the data was not substituted by the software because we only used it as a tool to support our analysis process (Paulus et al., 2017). Both researchers were involved in the coding process, primarily to identify the types of speech act in the comments, guided by the analytical framework developed for this study adapted from Carr et al. (2012).

Table 3 Analytical Framework for the Coding Process

Speech Act	Speech Act Properties
Assertive	Statements of fact, getting the viewer to form or attend a belief
Directive	The sender uses this to get the receiver to do something
Commissive	The sender commits himself to doing something
Expressive	The sender expresses feelings toward (though not necessarily about) the receiver
Effective	To change an institutional state of affairs
Verdictive	To determine what is the case in an institution
Quotation	The message is not originally produced by the sender

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Types of Speech Acts in the Facebook Comments

Our analysis revealed five speech acts used in Facebook comments to the official reports of COVID-19 cases. This is summarised in the following chart:

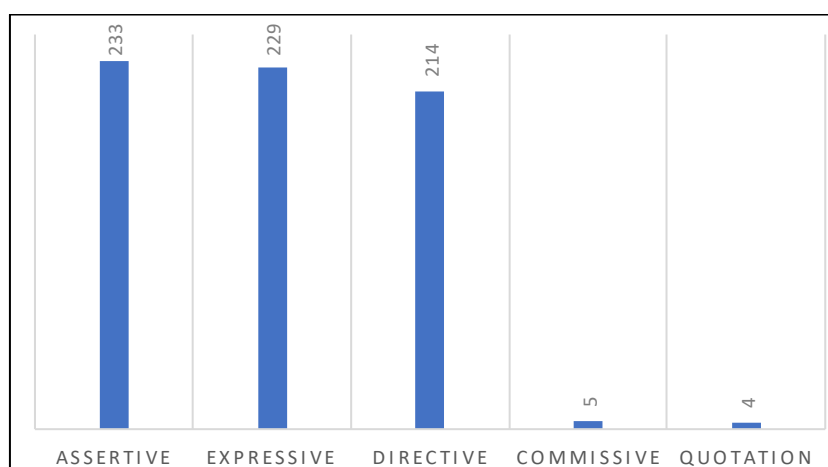


Figure 1 Types of speech acts in Facebook comments

As seen in the chart, the most frequently used speech act was assertively followed by expressive and directive. Our findings corroborated the findings of Carr et al. (2012). Our analysis shows that there were specific reasons associated with each speech act chosen by the Facebook commentators to post their comments to the daily report uploaded on the official Facebook page of the Malaysian National Security Council.

4.1.1 Functions of the assertive speech act

A sender performs an assertive speech act to get their recipient to form or attend to a belief (Clark, 1996). Statements conveyed in this speech act with the same specific function were found in our data, but they pointed to several more detailed functions of the assertive speech act. Several comments are related to the government's vaccination program. The commentators would remark on the vaccination process initiated by the government. Often, these statements were about their delayed vaccination appointment (excerpt 1). Besides, through this speech act, the commentators would also provide information on the most recent vaccination statistics (excerpts 1-2). In another excerpt, we found that one of the commentators asserted by justifying it as information shared by an expert in virology (excerpt 3). This strategy helped to reinforce

the weight of their assertion and convince others to believe them. In some of the samples, the Facebook commentators performed the assertive speech act to restate the number of new cases (excerpts 4 and 5). Although their comments were directly posted to daily reports, those commentators showed the tendency to restate the information to underscore the severity of COVID-19 effects on the community. Besides stating facts and information using the assertive speech act, there were also comments that could instigate anxiety among the public and prejudice against the government due to some groundless rumours asserted using this speech act (excerpts 6 and 7). These comments could be deleterious, especially if they were read by other Facebook users who refrained from verifying the truth of such information. Table 4 shows the assertive speech act subthemes and excerpts.

Table 4 Assertive Speech Act Subthemes and Excerpts

Subthemes	Excerpts
1. To make statements related to the government's vaccination program	<i>"Vaccination rate in KL has reached 110% however as KL-ite, I have not received the appointment date yet". Excerpt 1</i> <i>"16 million from 60+million number of doses." Excerpt 2</i> <i>"Yesterday I listened to a very detailed and clear explanation from an expert in virology with more than 30 years of experience, Dr (name), related to Covid-19 and ways to combat it." Excerpt 3</i>
2. To make statements about new cases related to the COVID-19	<i>204k, and I'm still not one of them..." Excerpt 4</i> <i>144 deaths" Excerpt 5</i>
3. To assert controversial remarks about the vaccination effort	<i>"Imports run as usual. Vaccination will be failed by lambda... lambda gen will hit us next..." Excerpt 6</i> <i>"Vaccination system practices cronyism... Younger people than us registered later and they had their jab.. We have registered since February but still no jab yet" Excerpt 7</i>

4.1.2 Functions of expressive speech act

An expressive speech act has the general function of expressing a feeling towards the recipient (Clark, 1996). In our data, the feelings can be split into two general types: positive and negative. This speech act indicated Malaysians' emotional reactions towards the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 5 shows the subthemes and excerpts under the category of expressive speech act. To express shock, a user expressed shock about the high number of deaths reaching three digits. This was indicated by the abbreviation for the informal exclamation "OMG". Using the expressive speech act, the commentators would express their worry about the country's current state, which was affected by COVID-19. In this speech act, they agonised over the failure of certain parties to control the virus from spreading uncontrollably rather than over the existence of the virus (excerpt 9). Besides, some commentators also expressed their sadness due to the high number of COVID-19-related cases realised by the expressive speech act (excerpt 10). Because the COVID-19 issue had caused grievous suffering to the citizens, mainly due to how the country handled it, these Facebook commentators also expressed their anger and disappointment by using the expressive speech act. While others had the tendency to express rather negative feelings about the spread and impact of COVID-19, some Facebook commentators could remain positive through their expression of hope conveyed by this speech act (excerpt 13). This was written as a prayer to ask for protection from the Almighty God. However, excerpt 14 contained an opposite meaning, although it was equally expressed as a prayer. In this expression, the Facebook user prayed for the Almighty's punishment against those in power as they were perceived to have made grave mistakes in managing COVID-19 which had caused the citizens to be in distress.

Table 5 Functions of Expressive Speech Act

Subthemes	Excerpts
1. To express shock	<i>"OMG! the death rate." Excerpt 8</i>
2. To express worry and sadness	<i>"Economic rebound.. I am a user of LRT and commute to work. I am worried about the RAPID operator/infrastructure not controlling the SOP. The seating arrangement is according to physical distancing but not those standing..crowded with immigrants, no SOP! I stayed at home for two months,daily cases are increasing...I am sad 😞😞" Excerpt 10</i>
3. To express frustration and anger	<i>"Damn it..selangor will only enter phase 2 in 2030 This is how to control the country's safety! Dissapointing!"</i>
4. To express hope	<i>"May the cases continue dropping..May Allah take away this deadly virus..and we can resume our lives as usual". Excerpt 13 "May you not receive a blessing from God for what you have done for the people". Excerpt 14</i>

4.1.3 Functions of directive speech act

A directive speech act is intended to get the recipient to do something (Clark, 1996). Our study also shows that Malaysians would use this speech act addressed to their virtual recipients to advise them about COVID-19. Table 6 shows the subthemes and excerpts under the category of directive speech act.

Table 6 Functions of Directive Speech Act

Subthemes	Excerpts
1. To give advice to the government	<i>"Where did it go wrong? Be sincere in giving information to the people". Excerpt 15 "Jab for vaccination could be done from house to house ...like population census ..therefore, lesser risk of infection while getting vaccinated" Excerpt 16 "It is hoped that the MINISTRY OF HEALTH MALAYSIA could speed up the clinical testing for ivermectin on humans so that we can be free just like 2 years ago". Excerpt 17 "It is hoped that the citizen-concerned government under the PRIME MINISTER AND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER gives leeway to the people who have completed their vaccination". Excerpt 18</i>
2. To give advice to fellow Malaysians	<i>"Let's get vaccinated guys. We could reach the herd community. Do not be scared and trust fake news about vaccination. Watch this video, may it help to alleviate your worries about the effect of vaccination. https://youtu.be/TXU7csvq438 Kesan Vaksin SINOVA VACCINE YOUTUBE.COM". Excerpt 24 "Follow sop. Take care of yourself and family". Excerpt 25</i>

The directive speech act directed at the government includes commands, requests or suggestions related to sharing of information about new cases (excerpt 15), the COVID-19 vaccination program (excerpt 16), clinical trials of alternative medicine to COVID-19 vaccines (excerpt 17), and relaxation in the enforcement of the standard operating procedure (SOP) during the pandemic (excerpt 18). Contrary to the latter requests, other Facebook commentators requested the government to be stricter in their law enforcement to help curb the virus spread. Another purpose of employing the directive speech act was also for the government to learn or emulate the management of the COVID-19 virus implemented by other countries such as China and Thailand. Besides, we found the speech act was used in Facebook comments to advise the

government to learn from other countries mistakes. In contrast to the directive speech act intended for the government, Facebook commentators who employed the same speech act for fellow Malaysians did so because they were concerned about each other's well-being. Using this speech act, they encouraged fellow Malaysians to vaccinate themselves and even reinforced their encouragement by providing a YouTube link for the targeted audience to watch the informative video (excerpt 24). In another excerpt, the Facebook user advised others to abide by the SOP for their and their family's safety (excerpt 25).

4.1.4 Functions of commissive and quotation speech acts

The commissive speech act commits the Facebook comment writer to do something (Clark, 1996), while the quotation speech act is copied from other sources (Carr et al., 2012). Besides the three very frequent speech acts, our corpus also had instances of the commissive and quotation speech acts, which occurred at a much lower frequency than those three. The commissive speech act was often used to warn the government of their disappointment with the increasing number of COVID-19 cases (excerpts 26-27). As for the quotation speech act, the quotation was adopted from the widely used tagline derived from the Malaysian government's campaign to increase awareness among Malaysians about the importance of safeguarding themselves and their loved ones against COVID-19 (excerpts 28-29). Table 7 shows the subthemes and excerpts under the category of commissive and quotation speech acts.

Table 7 Functions of Commissive and Quotation Speech Acts

Subthemes	Excerpts
1. commissive speech act	<i>"We..the citizens do value and observe your jokes, your behaviours. Hmmm". excerpts 26</i> <i>I'm not going to vote ever. excerpts 27</i>
2. quotation speech act	<i>"#let'stakecareofourselves". Excerpt 28</i> <i>"#stayathome". Excerpt 29</i>

4.2 Target Recipients of the Facebook Comments

Interestingly, we also found that the comments posted by the commentators were intended for two groups of recipients. One of the target recipients was the government, which was the target of most commentators, while the other was fellow citizens. When the speech acts were directed at the government, it was obvious that the commentators blamed the government for the perceived failure of COVID-19 management. Through the speech acts, blaming was expressed overtly by stating the recipient as the government in general or as a specific organisation. In some cases, the organisation was mentioned in an abbreviated form (excerpt 31).

"I don't know...strange...cases are getting weird..the government seems not to care". Excerpt 30

"KKM do not cheat people, death cases and side effects due to vaccination cannot be concealed just like that". Excerpt 31

There were also cases in which the government or its related organisations were not mentioned. Still, through closer scrutiny of the speech act, we could understand that the commentators were trying to blame the government for the seemingly weak enforcement of the movement control order.

"19k again and every sector is now open 😞 ops 😊". Excerpt 32

“How could the case not increase every day..those wearing pink bracelets are supposed to be doing home quarantine, but the truth is they are everywhere ”. Excerpt 33

When the comments were targeted at fellow citizens, the terms of address used were ‘guys’, ‘korang’, ‘kita’, and ‘sesiapa’, which were meant for the public in general. Some addressed the recipients specifically, as shown in excerpt (36).

“Let’s get vaccinated guys. We could reach the herd community. Do not believe in fake news about vaccination. Watch this video, may it help to alleviate your worries about the effect of vaccination. Subscribe, like and share, guys”. Excerpt 34

“Guys..please look at this ...May we receive protection from this critical situation 🙏”. Excerpt 35

“Please get vaccinated Pregnant Mothers”. Excerpt 36

Other than these, the target recipients were embedded within the speech acts. In other words, they were not clearly addressed but could be identified by closely examining the comments. For example, in excerpt (37), there was no specific target recipient stated, but through the directive speech act, the pronoun ‘you’ (Malay language second person pronoun, e.g. *Anda, awak, kamu, engkau*) was omitted and must be understood by the audience – an imperative structure similar to English imperative with the you-understood as viewed by traditional school grammar (Levenston, 1969). Meanwhile, in the following example, excerpt (38), the user seemed to greet their recipients by saying ‘*apa khabar*’, a Malay greeting equivalent to the English ‘how are you’ (Kuang et al., 2011). However, this could be read with a cynical tone. Instead of addressing the intended recipients explicitly using the second- or third-person pronoun, the subject was embedded in between the greeting and the phrase ‘*yang berjaya lepas balik raya hari tu*’ and ‘*yang*’ is a linking word equivalent to English ‘who’ (Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka Malaysia, n.d.). Even though the recipient was not spelt out in the comment, the linking word ‘*yang*’ can suggest that the intended recipients were those who had successfully returned home for the *Hari Raya* celebration during the pandemic.

“Keep following SOP, go out when necessary only ”. Excerpt 37

“How are (you) those who managed to go back to celebrate raya the other day 🙄🙄🙄 “. Excerpt 38

Although a large part of the blame was directed at the government, a few commentators still blamed their fellow citizens and attributed the spike in COVID-19 cases to their faults.

“Thousands of silent virus carriers, no wonder cases are increasing... ”. Excerpt 39

“Black Shirt Assembly Covid Cluster is now showing its consequences ”. Excerpt 40

“Jam..raya cluster is on the way ”. Excerpt 41

4.3 Distinctive Features used in Facebook Comments

Our analysis also shows eight distinctive features present in the Facebook comments. Five features – emoji, hashtag, abbreviation, orthographic emphasis, and repetitive speech- reflect those used in online communication. The other three – interjection, code-mixing, and profanity are more often used in face-to-face communication. Table 8 shows the subthemes and excerpts under the category of distinctive features used in Facebook comments.

Table 8 Distinctive Features used in Facebook Comments

Subthemes	Excerpts
1. Emoji	<i>Every day there must be import cases 🤔 It has been two months of staying at home; the cases continue spiking...so sad 😞😞😞</i>
2. Hashtag	<i>#stayathome #failgovernment PLEASE #closefactories</i>
3. Abbreviation	<i>Acronym: Do not open inter state or district travelling now, only allowed those being authorised by Miti & Police. Initialism: what happens to negeri sembilan's emco ??? Replacement: Lockdown is x like lockdown Emergency state is x like the real emergency. Elimination: The most hopeless gov! Combination: No need to implement mco or emco. Just open all sectors. Duplication: Impossible. It has been 2 years but still unsettled. Duplication alteration: Every day, counting the high cases..it's like everybody is just waiting to be infected</i>
4. Orthographic emphasis	<i>What is the GOVERNMENT's stand? Excerpt 53 Waste time lahhhhhhhhhhhh Excerpt 53 A lot. When will the lockdown take place to save Malaysians????????? Excerpt 53</i>
5. Repetitive speech act	<i>TOTAL LOCKDOWN 100% TOTAL LOCKDOWN 100%. Excerpt 56 Let's get vaccinated guys. We could reach the herd community. Do not believe in fake news about vaccination. Watch this video, may it help to alleviate your worries about the effect of vaccination. https://youtu.be/TXU7csvq438 Effects of SINOVAC YOUTUBE.COM. Excerpt 56</i>
6. Interjection	<i>I read 🙄. but can't understand la .. Where is the outcome for EMCO??? Over time it gets even more annoying....</i>
7. Code-mixing	<i>All irrelevant planning and no proper research. Why hasn't EMCO been announced?</i>
8. Loanword	<i>Boring. Excerpt 63 Come on, sir. Till when will it be like this? Excerpt 64</i>
9. Profanity	<i><u>Damn</u>...favoritism...well deserved. I've been at home for 3 months with this fxxx lockdown, EMCO, but no decrease in cases.</i>

Emojis were used in comments expressed using the three most frequent speech acts – expressive, assertive, and directive. The emojis were attached to assertive and directive speech acts to convey the commentators’ emotions which could not be expressed in words or attached to expressive speech act to intensify their feelings already expressed through the speech act.

The hashtag is intended initially to make messages or information more easily searchable. By employing hashtags, a social media user helps fellow users read posts indexed with the same keywords that may even be trending at any time. Our sample found instances of hash-tagged messages created based on the trending issue and topic circulated among Malaysian social media users. In addition, other users hash-tagged their messages for a different reason. When the hashtag was employed in their posts, they appeared to do so as a strategy to emphasise the

most important part of their posts which encompassed their call for action, expression of emotions, and outburst of profanity.

It was common to find the comments in our corpus written using abbreviated words. The abbreviation was identified in both Malay and English comments. The patterns adopted by these commentators to abbreviate the words were an acronym, initialism, replacement, elimination, combination, duplication, and reduplication alteration. There were no specific patterns used in completing a comment. Instead, these appeared to vary, which implies that the pattern selection was performed subconsciously.

The instances of orthographic emphasis found in the corpus were not limited to phrases written in capital letters (excerpt 53). This also included those spelled in repetitive letters (excerpt 54) and marked with repetitive punctuation marks (excerpt 55). The use of orthographic emphasis in performing part of a speech act functioned as an intensification of the speech act and conveyed a user's emotion enshrouded by the texts. Repetition of speech acts was found to occur in the same comment (excerpt 56), or a different comment posted on a different day (excerpt 57). The occurrence of this element in Facebook comments did not simply refer to the repetition of a specific type of speech act but rather the repetition of an entirely similar text which was expressed using the same speech act.

Speakers include interjections in their utterances as an expression of their current mental state and reactions toward certain elements present in a speech context (Ameka, 2006). Although this is commonly found in spoken interactions and dialogues, our analysis shows that Facebook commentators would include interjections in certain speech acts in their textual comments as they would in verbal interactions. Using these interjections did not necessarily mean that the commentators tried to convey their emotions, as some interjections in the Malay language can have various functions (Hoogervorst, 2018). In the following excerpts, the interjections emphasised assertive, directive, and expressive speech acts respectively.

Malaysia is a country with a rich cultural tapestry reflected in the various languages and dialects spoken by the people. This diversity was also reflected in the Facebook comments posted by the commentators through code-mixing. As most of these comments were written in Malay, the commentators code-mixed their comments between Malay and English, Malay, and various dialects and colloquials spoken by people from different Malaysian states. The use of loanwords is separated from the code-mixing category considering that a loanword can even emerge in a single language speech as the word is conventionally used as part of a language (Haspelmath, 2009). Many English words are loaned into the Malay language and integrated into daily conversations among Malay speakers. The use of loanwords was also detected in Malay speakers' Facebook comments. In excerpt 63, the loanword 'boring' deviated from its grammatical use in English, which is meant to encourage carrying out an action. However, it is common to find Malay speakers use this loanword to describe their feelings and urge others to think twice, as shown in excerpt 64. The COVID-19 pandemic has unsurprisingly negatively impacted people's emotional stability (Restubog et al., 2020). In Facebook comments, this was evident in the use of profanities mostly hurled at the government.

5. DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine what Facebook commentators do through their comments on the COVID-19 report posted on the official Facebook page of the Malaysian National Security Council. The analysis found that the commentators communicated their intent in various ways that can be organised in different speech acts. The three most frequent speech acts through which the commentators communicated their intent in a textual form were assertive, expressive,

and directive. When applied in online communication, specifically one that transpires via social media such as Facebook, an assertive speech act is employed by a user to state a belief regardless of its truth (Banikalef, 2019). Based on the findings, commentators used this speech act to state facts and opinions on COVID-19, specifically about the national vaccination program and statistics of new COVID-19 cases and vaccinated individuals. When such statements were posted on Facebook, especially those which appeared questionable and groundless, it shows that Facebook is also utilised as a medium to spread personal assumptions and rumours.

Social media provide an open platform for Internet users to share news, stories, personal experiences and viewpoints (Zubiaga et al., 2016). It is easier for them to post unverified statements and information, which can be easily spread to others. Facebook users realise expressive speech act to express their psychological states on the online platform (Banikalef, 2019). Through this speech act, this study found that the commentators expressed various positive and negative emotions due to the conflicts caused by COVID-19. Furthermore, Facebook has been utilised to express positive and negative emotions, which is also considered a more appropriate medium to do so compared to other social media such as Twitter and Instagram (Waterloo et al., 2018).

As for the directive speech act, this study found that the advice, commands, suggestions, and requests were addressed to the Malaysian government and fellow citizens. By employing this speech act in their comments, the Facebook commentators seemed to exhibit a certain level of personal knowledge about COVID-19 and its management to the two groups of addressees. Having dealt with the pandemic for over two years, these commentators tried to showcase experience and information about COVID-19 management implemented in the country and other foreign countries. Moreover, Malaysians took precautions even before the movement control order was enforced nationwide (Azlan et al., 2020).

Although the present study only examined the types of speech acts performed in this online genre – Facebook comments in the Malaysian context and did not attempt to investigate the co-occurrence of several types of speech acts in every Facebook comment, the researchers noticed that some of the comments in the corpus did exhibit these characteristics, e.g., Directive – assertive – directive or assertive – directive – expressive. These characteristics were also noted by Carr et al. (2012) in their study of speech acts on Facebook status messages. Hence, this could mean that when people make comments online, they communicate messages that contain not only a meaningless string of words, phrases, or sentences but convey a hybrid of speech acts that can be translated into several functions. As communication via this medium is also asynchronous, as in email communication, Facebook comments are expected to also tend to be embedded with multiple speech acts (Carvalho, 2011), unlike synchronous communication, which involves a series of turn-talking as a result of cooperative achievement between the speakers, thus, leads to a sequence of speech acts (Félix-Brasdefer, 2014).

A further examination of the comments also revealed that they were posted for two recipient groups: the Malaysian government and the Malaysian public. In their comments, the Facebook commentators appeared to blame these two addressees, rather than themselves, if there were any loopholes in the movement control order that caused yet another alarming COVID-19 outbreak in the country. The pandemic, which went on for many years, triggered fear among people, thus, provoking them to ascribe the fault to others (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020). Several studies have documented this issue, which shows that people tend to blame the citizens of other countries, international travellers, foreign refugees, and border trespassers (Bala & Lumayag, 2021; Hardy et al., 2021; Labbé et al., 2022). This practice of blaming is known as ‘othering’

by degrading others, usually people from a marginalised group or out-group (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020). This othering practice can even result in a severe stage of exclusion (Bala & Lumayag, 2021). While the commentators might view themselves as self-disciplined and law-abiding, blaming others in the course of the pandemic also reflects a collective comment and solidarity in fighting against selfless, individualistic people (Labbé et al., 2022). Besides, it also implies that the commentators had formed in their minds their imagined audiences – abstract or target when they posted their comments. Abstract audiences are vague and general, whereas target audiences are specific and directed (Litt & Hargittai, 2016).

This study's detailed perusal of the comments showed that the Facebook commentators did not merely write their comments in a straightforward textual form. Instead, their comments were interwoven with unique characteristics present only in online communication, such as emails and chats, or those often used in face-to-face communication. Incorporating emojis in online communication is not simply the inclusion of graphic symbols in textual messages. They play an important role in this communication, namely to upgrade or downgrade the impact of an illocution (Sampietro, 2019). This is the same as the use of the hashtag in the comments. Although hash-tagged messages are usually used as keywords to help other users search for related messages (Zangerle et al., 2013), our study indicates that some would hashtag their comments for different communicative reasons. These include calls for action, expressions of emotions, and outbursts of profanity. Other styles adopted by the Facebook commentators in writing their comments were abbreviation, orthographic emphasis, repetition, interjection, code-mixing, loanword, and words of profanity – the last five resemble those used in spoken interactions. These micro-linguistic features are typical of the online discourse (Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017) because expressing one's meaning in text-laden communication using non-verbal communication cues is impossible. The paucity of these cues in online communication has contributed to these distinctive micro-linguistic conventions, which are influenced by various use-related and user-related factors such as communication purpose, writers' intention, sociolinguistic background, language, and script (Bieswanger, 2013).

6. CONCLUSION

The adoption of social media during the pandemic surpassed other sources and platforms, e.g. broadcast and print media, official websites, and family and friends (Mat Dawi et al., 2021). This study has documented the use of language in one social media - Facebook- by examining 555 comments posted in response to the daily reports of COVID-19 cases that occurred in a Malaysian context. Although this study primarily focused on the use of speech acts in these Facebook comments, an extensive analysis of the comments helped us to identify that each speech act carries a very specific function that is reflective of the situation in which the speech acts were performed. This study was conducted on a very small scale related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. However, it was found that Facebook comments can represent people's opinions, emotions, and conditions in their reactions to a health pandemic like COVID-19. Using social media during public health crises is considered efficient as it adheres to the "*telling it all and telling it now and telling the truth*" principle, mainly because it concerns the public's well-being and requirement for instant information (Graham et al., 2015, p.7). Thus, it is important that government representatives analyse the public's reactions through their comments to understand the public's demands, customise crisis information and respond to their comments to increase communication with the public and engagement level (Chen et al., 2020). One way to carry this out is by studying the occurrences of speech acts and micro-linguistic features in the comments. Due to the small scope of this study, it is suggested that future research extends the study by increasing the corpus size and conducting a comparative

study by considering social factors (e.g., age, gender, racial group, and socioeconomic) and other factors such as platform differences.

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