

Humble-Bragging Discourse among Malaysian Influencers on Threads

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions of humble-bragging among Malaysian influencers on Meta's Threads platform. Integrating Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Politeness Theory, it analyses how creators navigate the tension between commercial self-promotion and cultural expectations of modesty. The study reveals that the interactive, text-driven architecture of Threads elevates the "sincerity cost" of indirect self-presentation. Case studies of prominent Malaysian influencers demonstrate that humility-based tactics, such as religious or familial invocations, often trigger audience skepticism despite aligning with collectivist values, while complaint-based displays of privilege are dismissed as manipulative. The paper advocates for transparent self-promotion and authentic vulnerability as essential tools to sustain audience trust and digital capital within the Southeast Asian creator economy.

Keywords: illocutionary conduct, self-presentation, humble-bragging, whining, Threads application

INTRODUCTION

Social media has evolved from a basic networking tool into a robust ecosystem for strategic personal branding (Jerry & Tavares-James, 2020). In Malaysia, this digital environment is highly lucrative, with social media users accounting for 83.1% of the population, a hyper-competitive local influencer market valued at over \$84 million, and more than 58% of consumers trusting influencers to shape public discourse (Insg, 2026). Meta's text-based platform, Threads, has disrupted this creator economy by allowing influencers to seamlessly port their Instagram networks into a more informal, dialogic space (Supermetrics, 2026; Sprout Social, 2026). By prioritizing text-driven storytelling and multi-directional interactions over the polished visual curation of Instagram or the passive video skimming of TikTok, Threads' reply-centric algorithmic feed rewards conversational depth, driving an exceptionally high median engagement rate of 3.8% to 4.5% (Sprout Social, 2026).

The transition from visual to text-based platform architecture presents a profound communicative dilemma for Malaysian influencers. While securing lucrative brand deals requires demonstrating material success and high-status lifestyles (Insg, 2026; Na, 2024), Malaysia's collectivist, high-context culture traditionally discourages overt self-aggrandizement. Guided by Islamic morality and the socio-cultural framework of courtesy and reciprocal face-saving, Malaysian society deeply values humility and self-restraint (Al Afnan & Cruz-Rudio, 2023; Tanduk, 2023). To reconcile commercial self-promotion with these cultural demands, influencers frequently rely on humble-bragging, masking their boasts behind superficial complaints or self-deprecation (Hanani et al., 2025). However, pragmatic research indicates this strategy backfires; audiences routinely decode false humility as manipulative and disingenuous rather than relatable (Jansson-Boyd, 2026; Han et al., 2024). This socio-pragmatic friction is further intensified by a shifting local regulatory environment, notably the enforcement of the Online Safety Act (OSA) 2025 in January 2026, and recent MCMC data, which reflect a digital consumer base that is increasingly skeptical, legally aware, and intolerant of masked privilege amid macroeconomic anxieties (Reuters, 2026; Hanani et al., 2025).

While humble-bragging has been extensively studied within Western psychological paradigms, it remains underexamined in applied linguistics, particularly within the text-based ecosystem of Threads. This conceptual inquiry addresses this literature gap by focusing on the discourse of Malaysian influencers. Utilising Speech Act Theory, Gricean pragmatics, and Politeness Theory, the study investigates how these digital creators construct and negotiate their public identities, identifies their defining lexicogrammatical patterns, and evaluates their broader sociolinguistic impact within the Malaysian digital landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Pragmatics of Digital Self-Presentation and Identity Negotiation

From a sociological standpoint, impression management and self-presentation rely on the strategic use of verbal and non-verbal cues to shape audience perception (Jerry & Tavares-James, 2020). To navigate digital environments successfully, individuals construct curated identities designed to maximise social and commercial rewards while minimising interpersonal or reputational penalties (Jerry & Tavares-James, 2020). On platforms where personal branding is directly associated with financial gain, creators face a constant tension, as they must project an image that is both highly sought-after and universally relatable (Na, 2024). The idea of direct self-praise will create conflicts with deeply ingrained social norms of politeness; individuals may be inclined to adopt indirect self-enhancement strategies, mostly humble-bragging (Zibin et al., 2024).

Humble-bragging serves to balance the human needs for humility, social integration, and self-esteem, leading to self-enhancement and status-seeking (Han et al., 2024). Pragmatic taxonomies categorise humble-bragging into two primary categories: complaint-based variants, where the speaker complains about their achievement or asset as something annoying. Another category is humility-based variants, where the speaker highlights an accomplishment while deflecting arrogance by mentioning luck as the reason for their success (Jansson-Boyd, 2026; Han et al., 2024).

Significant advancement of pragmatic taxonomy within language used in social media was established by Na (2024). A multidimensional scale was created to identify six distinct structural dimensions of humble-bragging: (a) self-praise paired with a disclaimer, (b) praise attributed to a third party, (c) self-praise with a shift of focus, (d) self-praise with self-denigration, (e) self-praise with a reference to hard work, and (f) self-praise disguised as a complaint. The researcher also demonstrated that the majority of these dimensions negatively impact the audience's point of view. The only sub-strategies found to earn a favourable and statistically significant effect on post-likability are self-praise paired with a shift of focus and self-praise accompanied by self-denigration (Na, 2024).

Indirect Speech Acts and the Mechanics of the Humble-Brag

The linguistic structure of humble-bragging is characterised by differences between literal form and communicative intent. This study utilises Speech Act Theory, which examines how language performs actions through locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions (Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). This framework conceptualises an utterance as a multifaceted performance wherein the locutionary act (the literal production of words) remains distinct from both the illocutionary force (the intended pragmatic function) and the perlocutionary effect (the actual psychological or behavioural impact on the recipient) (Zibin et al., 2024).

Searle's taxonomy proved that humble-bragging functions as a complex indirect speech act where an explicit expressive layer, such as a complaint or display of gratitude, masks an implicit, primary assertive layer designed to boast about wealth, status, or achievement (Han et al., 2024; Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). The efficiency in communication of this strategy depends on the audience's ability to decode dual-layered meaning through contextual inference. In addition, Grice's Cooperative Principle can explain how this interpretive process occurs because the speaker strategically defies conversational maxims, thereby generating pragmatic implications that reveal the underlying self-promotion (Han et al., 2024).

The Cultural Architecture of Modesty in Malaysian Digital Space

Inherently self-centred, boasting carries significant social risks. Grounded in Politeness Theory, individuals continuously manage their "face", which is usually the public self-image that is acceptable in society (Tanduk, 2023). This self-image is divided into positive and negative faces, the desire to be liked and approved of, and the desire for autonomy. Within this framework, direct boasting functions as a highly disruptive face-threatening act (FTA) that targets the audience's self-esteem. By openly declaring success, wealth, or superiority, the speaker implicitly establishes a social hierarchy. This conversational imbalance can jeopardise the hearer's positive face, as it can provoke feelings of inferiority, envy, or relative deprivation (Tanduk, 2023). To mitigate this threat and preserve social harmony, speakers employ politeness strategies designed to soften the aggressiveness of the boast (Tanduk, 2023). Humble-bragging thus emerges as a form of face-saving mitigation, disguising a stark status assertion under the polite guise of personal modesty or shared human suffering (Che Ismail & Mohd Nordin, 2025; Sharifah N. A. & Lilisuriani N., 2021).

Linguistic politeness depends heavily on cultural context (Al Afnan & Cruz-Rudio, 2023). In this context, within societies like Malaysia, individual self-enhancement is discouraged to protect community harmony and collective face (Al Afnan & Cruz-Rudio, 2023). This cultural focus on modesty favours more indirect communication, conflict avoidance, and respectful language structured around social hierarchies (Che Ismail & Mohd Nordin, 2025). This mindset is even mirrored in traditional Malay architecture, which strictly separates the private rumah ibu (core house) for family intimacy from the public serambi (verandah) for social gatherings. This physical division ensures that modesty and religious customs are preserved, showing how deeply these boundaries shape Malaysian communication styles (Che Ismail & Mohd Nordin, 2025).

Malaysian social media users hold online creators to offline moral standards rooted in positive politeness, meaning that influencers who lack modesty face severe public backlash (Tanduk, 2023; Al Afnan & Cruz-Rudio, 2023; Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). To navigate this collectivist space, creators adopt culturally grounded strategies, such as invoking religious phrases such as *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to Allah) or *Insha'Allah* (If Allah wills) to reframe personal success as a divine blessing rather than an individual triumph (Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). However, as the digital economy expands, a sharp sociolinguistic conflict has emerged between these traditional expectations of modesty and the commercial demands of modern influencer marketing (Che Ismail & Mohd Nordin, 2025; Na, 2024).

DISCUSSION

Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of Complaint-Based Humble-Bragging on Threads

Complaint-based humble-bragging on Threads functions as a strategic rhetorical maneuver that highlights enviable assets, financial achievements, or high-status consumer choices while simultaneously projecting irritation, fatigue, or physical discomfort (Hanani et al., 2025; Han et al., 2024). Within the platform's architecture, where a 500-character limit encourages concise, conversational updates (Sprout Social, 2026), this strategy manifests as text-based disclosures that attempt to mitigate the face-threatening act of boasting by framing success as a physical or logistical burden (Han et al., 2024; Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021).

From a speech act perspective, these posts utilise a dual-component pragmatic structure, pairing an implicit assertive act with an explicit expressive act (Han et al., 2024). To illustrate this dynamic, this analysis examines a case study of prominent Malaysian luxury fashion influencer Prince Syed Shahid (operating as Prince Syed Couture), whose pre-festive shopping excursions offer rich discursive data (Hanani et al., 2025). A representative complaint-based post from this creator reads:

"Oh God, I feel like fainting... I spent RM980K on gold jewelry at SMS Deen Jeweler today, right after already splurging on our main Raya shopping. My head is spinning from the massive crowd and the sheer physical exhaustion of trying on so many heavy custom pieces. Honestly, RM980K is reasonable after all the special discounts they gave me, but I feel feverish (demam rasa) from all this retail stress! I was so overwhelmed by the staff's service that I didn't even realize I had spent nearly one million ringgit in a single store. 'Exhausted' doesn't even begin to describe it." (Hanani et al., 2025: 761)

Within this thread, the influencer executes a complex, double-layered indirect speech act. The explicit layer of the discourse is formulated as an expressive complaint regarding severe physical and emotional distress, utilizing high-affect linguistic markers such as “feel like fainting,” “head is spinning,” “demam rasa,” and “retail stress” (Hanani et al., 2025). However, the implicit, primary illocutionary force serves as an assertive act that informs the audience of an extraordinary display of purchasing power, specifically a single transaction totalling RM980,000 (Hanani et al., 2025).

This utterance flouts the Gricean Maxim of Quality (Han et al., 2024). The speaker's underlying psychological state is not one of genuine physical suffering or economic hardship; instead, the complaint functions as a performative shield intended to mitigate the positive face threat of displaying immense financial privilege in a public digital space (Tanduk, 2023). By framing the luxury transaction as a source of exhaustion and stress, the influencer attempts to establish common ground with the audience, projecting an image of a relatable, hard-working individual who is simply burdened by difficult circumstances (Hanani et al., 2025; Jerry & Tavares-James, 2020).

Within Threads' interactive, reply-centric architecture, which prioritizes conversational depth over passive scrolling, this complaint-based strategy triggers severe perlocutionary backlash (Sprout Social, 2026). Modern users are highly sensitive to deceptive self-presentation, meaning that framing immense economic privilege, such as spending nearly a million ringgit on luxury goods, as a “burden” appears profoundly tone-deaf amid rising cost-of-living anxieties (Jansson-Boyd, 2026; Hanani et al., 2025). Consequently, the complaint fails to elicit sympathy and is instead decoded as manipulative and narcissistic (Jansson-Boyd, 2026). Rather than softening the boast, this performative grievance magnifies the speaker's perceived arrogance, sparking critical counter-discourse and eroding audience trust (Jansson-Boyd, 2026; Hanani et al., 2025).

Pragmatic Manifestations of Humility-Based Humblebragging on Threads

Humility-based humblebragging on Threads represents a distinct, more culturally aligned communicative strategy (Hanani et al., 2025; Han et al., 2024). Rather than relying on complaints, influencers frame their displays of wealth, status, or achievement within profound expressions of gratitude, disbelief, or unworthiness. This mechanism effectively shifts the locus of success outward, attributing personal achievements to external forces such as luck, familial devotion, or divine benevolence (Han et al., 2024).

On Threads, a platform where personal narratives, lifestyle reflections, and conversational authenticity drive robust user engagement (Supermetrics, 2026; SproutSocial, 2026), humility-based humblebragging has become highly prevalent among Malaysian creators (Hanani et al., 2025). This phenomenon is structurally realised by pairing an explicit assertion of high status with expressive speech acts of devotion or self-deprecation (Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). For example, a prominent Malaysian fashion creator shared the following post:

"I never imagined that this year I would be able to own a custom, fully beaded Raya outfit worth almost RM830K. Believe it or not, it's true because of the intricate beadwork and sparkling, genuine Swarovski crystals. Truly, I feel so small and undeserving. This is not to brag, but to remind everyone that, Insha'Allah, if we seek out halal sustenance, Allah will reward us and ease our lives. Even if only for a brief moment, we can experience a glimpse of this world's paradise. Alhamdulillah." (Hanani et al., 2025: 762)

Here, the influencer strategically pairs an assertive boast regarding RM830,000 custom garment with expressive declarations of gratitude and self-deprecation (Hanani et al., 2025). By presenting the acquisition as a divine blessing and a reward for halal sustenance rather than a personal financial triumph, the influencer protects their positive face. This framing successfully negotiates the tension between wealth display and the collectivist, faith-driven values expected within the Malaysian socio-cultural landscape (Che Ismail & Mohd Nordin, 2025; Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021).

This humility-based approach is theoretically more acceptable than its complaint-based counterpart (Hanani et al., 2025; Na, 2024). As Na (2024) highlights, attributing success to external forces or divine will aligns closely with traditional Asian cultural frameworks that prioritize humility and discourage individualistic pride (Han et

al., 2024). Within the Malaysian landscape, where public discourse and everyday interactions are deeply mediated by moral and religious codes, framing luxury as a divine blessing operates as a powerful mechanism for social bonding (Tanduk, 2023; Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). Ultimately, this strategy enables influencers to demonstrate their commercial viability, which is vital for maintaining their market position, while simultaneously preserving an illusion of modesty (Hanani et al., 2025; Na, 2024).

Despite its cultural resonance, the "sincerity gap" remains a major vulnerability for influencer credibility. On a platform where audiences closely scrutinize textual nuances, the friction between conspicuous wealth and professed unworthiness is highly transparent (Jansson-Boyd, 2026; Sprout Social, 2026). This fragile narrative breaks down completely when a creator documents a massive RM125,000 cash withdrawal while claiming to feel financially "limited" (Hanani et al., 2025). Rather than accepting this framing, critical users decode it as a strategic shield against accusations of ostentation (Hanani et al., 2025; Jansson-Boyd, 2026). When expressions of gratitude are weaponized to justify extreme privilege, admiration gives way to alienation, transforming perceived vulnerability into an overt marketing maneuver that damages consumer trust (Na, 2024; Jansson-Boyd, 2026).

Distribution of Illocutionary Points and Lexicogrammatical Markers

The structural and pragmatic architectures of this discourse are clearly reflected in the empirical distribution of illocutionary points within Malaysian influencer humblebragging (Hanani et al., 2025). Quantitative content analysis indicates that specific speech acts are highly concentrated across both complaint- and humility-based variations (Hanani et al., 2025). An evaluation of 14 distinct instances derived from representative datasets demonstrates a polarized pragmatic framework: assertive and expressive speech acts serve as the primary illocutionary points, while directive, commissive, and declarative acts remain statistically marginalized (Hanani et al., 2025). This distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Illocutionary Points in Syed Shahid's Humblebragging Statements on Threads and Instagram

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

Note. Adapted from Hanani Mohamed Hamdan, Mazni Muslim, Nurma abdul Manap, and Aishah Baharudin (2025).

Accounting for 85.7% of the total distribution with three instances of each across both platforms, the striking symmetry between assertive and expressive speech acts empirically validates the dual-component pragmatic model of humblebragging (Hanani et al., 2025). To successfully execute this communicative strategy, an influencer must pair a factual assertion of high-status achievement (the assertive act) with an emotional commentary of distress or modesty (the expressive act) (Han et al., 2024).

Without the assertive act, the communicative effort is reduced to a simple complaint or an expression of humility; conversely, without the expressive act, the post becomes a straightforward, unmitigated boast (Han et al., 2024; Sharifah Nurul Afifah & Lilisuriani, 2021). Meanwhile, directive speech acts, which account for only one instance on each platform, serve as minor conversational prompts designed to elicit audience confirmation or engagement. Questions such as "believe it or not?" or "what do you think?" function strategically to catalyze further interaction within the platform's discourse threads (Hanani et al., 2025).

Humblebragging on Threads relies on specific lexicogrammatical configurations to balance self-promotion with projected humility (Han et al., 2024). First, the pervasive use of self-referential pronouns ("I," "my," "me," "I'm") establishes that the discourse remains fundamentally egocentric, despite performative expressions of complaint

or gratitude. This foundation is sustained through dual-component lexical pairings that juxtapose achievement-oriented words ("award," "million") with humility or negative-affect markers ("undeserving," "exhausted") (Hamdan et al., 2025; Han et al., 2024). Within these structures, the intensifier "so" (frequency: 212) serves as an emotional amplifier. By pairing "so" with trailing prepositions, as seen in the phrase "so exhausted from traveling," creators subtly tether their professed distress directly to their underlying success. Conversely, the adverb "just" (frequency: 159) operates as a semantic minimizer designed to mitigate threats to the hearer's positive face (Han et al., 2024; Tanduk, 2023). By framing an RM830,000 outfit as "just a simple garment" or an exorbitant allowance as "just what I can afford," influencers strategically downplay their privilege, casting extraordinary luxury as ordinary and unremarkable (Hamdan et al., 2025).

Additionally, Threads hashtags like #blessed, #humble, or #workinghard function as Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), metalinguistically directing audience interpretation (Tanduk, 2023). However, this tactic often backfires on interactive platforms (Jansson-Boyd, 2026). Appending a curated tag like #blessed to a display of extreme wealth explicitly exposes the post's strategic nature. By shattering the illusion of natural vulnerability, it prompts audiences to decode the text as a calculated marketing message rather than a genuine reflection (Jansson-Boyd, 2026).

Table 2 Comparative Pragmatic Framework of Humblebragging Strategies on Threads

Humblebrag Type	Platform / Instances	Dominant Illocutionary Acts	Illustrative Example	Main Function
Complaint-based	TikTok/ Threads (3)	Assertive + Expressive	RM980K gold purchase framed as "I feel like fainting"	Masks privilege as hardship; enhances relatability
Humility-based	TikTok/ Threads (3)	Assertive + Expressive (gratitude/religiosity)	RM830K outfit attributed to "Allah's blessings"	Softens ostentation via piety; aligns with cultural modest
Note. Adapted from Hanani Mohamed Hamdan, Mazni Muslim, Nurma Abdul Manap, and Aishah Baharudin (2025).				

The prevalence of humblebragging among Malaysian influencers highlights a fundamental structural conflict within the contemporary creator economy (Na, 2024). A highly competitive marketing landscape requires creators to continuously showcase material success and premium lifestyles to secure lucrative brand partnerships (Insg, 2026; Na, 2024). Conversely, the traditional cultural paradigm of courtesy and modesty, combined with the community-driven architecture of Threads, demands high levels of conversational authenticity, vulnerability, and mutual respect (Sprout Social, 2026; Che Ismail & Mohd Nordin, 2025).

This tension precipitates a "sincerity paradox" (Jansson-Boyd, 2026). Influencers deploy humblebragging as a calculated attempt to resolve this conflict, hoping to project professional competence while retaining social likeability (Han et al., 2024). However, by attempting to satisfy both competing demands through a dual-component strategy, they often achieve neither. Consequently, humblebragging remains a counterproductive self-presentation strategy because audiences fundamentally decode it as insincere and manipulative (Jansson-Boyd, 2026).

Modern social media users prioritize authenticity over calculated attempts to disguise ambition or wealth (Jansson-Boyd, 2026). Consequently, while straightforward bragging remains culturally discouraged, audiences often perceive it as more honest than performative modesty. Conversely, genuine humility and a willingness to share uncensored vulnerabilities foster the deep, lasting connections that secure long-term trust (Na, 2024; Jansson-Boyd, 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study explores the psychological, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic dynamics of humble-bragging among Malaysian influencers on Meta's Threads platform. Utilising Searle's Speech Act Theory, the analysis examines how digital creators balance the commercial drive for self-promotion with deeply rooted cultural values of modesty, courtesy, and religious devotion.

The findings highlight that humble-bragging, whether complaint- or humility-based, is an unstable and often counterproductive strategy. While complaint-based posts frame high status as a stressful inconvenience to elicit sympathy, modern audiences largely decode these efforts as insincere or narcissistic. Similarly, humility-based variants that rely on performative piety or familial devotion to obscure wealth often fail, incurring a high cost to perceived sincerity. Because Threads prioritizes conversational depth and text-based dialogue over visual curation, the platform acts as a filter that rapidly exposes these sincerity gaps.

Malaysian influencers navigating this competitive ecosystem face clear implications (Na, 2024). Couching self-promotion in false modesty is increasingly ineffective in a digital landscape where consumers demand transparent, authentic, and socially responsible communication (Jansson-Boyd, 2026; MCMC, 2024). To sustain engagement and build lasting brand trust, creators must move away from calculated self-presentation tactics (Na, 2024; Jansson-Boyd, 2026). By adopting direct self-promotion for achievements and sharing genuine vulnerability during challenges, influencers can foster deeper connections that honor both traditional cultural values and modern digital expectations (Jansson-Boyd, 2026; Che Ismail & Mohd Nordin, 2025). Future research should explore these digital discursive shifts through quantitative corpus linguistics and longitudinal analyses of user-influencer interactions across emerging Southeast Asian social spaces (Al Afnan & Cruz-Rudio, 2023).

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Declaration of AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized generative AI platforms, including Gemini Pro (accessed via UiTM institutional access) and Scopus AI, to enhance the readability and language clarity of the manuscript. Following the use of these technologies, the authors thoroughly reviewed, edited, and verified the text as required, and they assume full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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