

Hate Speech in Social Media Comments on the UEC Issue: A Linguistic Analysis of Malaysian Online Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Hate speech surrounding the UEC issue does not function merely as offensive commentary; it works as a linguistic site where ethnic identity, national belonging, and educational legitimacy are contested. This study examines hate speech in TikTok comments, specifically comments from videos reactions which responding to the Buletin TV3 news report on the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), a long-debated qualification associated with Chinese independent secondary schools in Malaysia. Using Culpeper's distinction between impoliteness and hate speech as the analytical framework, the study investigates how commenters construct hates through first-order evaluations of impoliteness and hatefulness, and through second-order pragmatic dimensions of face, incitement, intentionality, foreseeability, and accountability. A qualitative method using content analysis approach was conducted on a purposive sample of 222 TikTok comments containing explicit markers of hostile, derogatory, and politically charged language. The findings show that the dominant target of hate speech is not the UEC alone, but the government and political actors perceived to support or legitimise it. Comments attacking the Prime Minister, UMNO, and the ruling administration construct the UEC as evidence of betrayal, deception, and national decline. Ethnicity enters the discourse not merely as an explicit object of abuse, but as a delegitimising resource: references to Chinese identity, DAP, and national loyalty are used to frame government policy as capitulation to ethnic interests. The analysis further reveals that face attacks and incitement operate together, with commenters damaging the social identity face of political actors while urging audiences toward collective rejection, electoral punishment, or distrust of state authority. Rather than treating TikTok hostility as spontaneous anger, this study argues that hate speech on the UEC issue performs ideological work by transforming an education-policy debate into a discourse of political betrayal, ethnic suspicion, and contested national belonging. The findings contribute to pragmatics-based hate speech research by showing how Malaysian online discourse converts policy disagreement into accountable forms of identity-based and institution-directed aggression.

Keywords: hate speech, impoliteness, UEC, TikTok, Malaysian online discourse, social media comments

INTRODUCTION

The Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) debate on TikTok is not simply a dispute over access to Malaysian public universities. It has become a site where government legitimacy, ethnic trust, and national education are argued through hostile public language. In Malaysian online discourse, hate and hostility often attach not only to ethnicity and religion but also to political views, while online antagonism around education and governance can amplify collective anxieties and erode institutional credibility (Azman et al., 2023; Rashid & Ding., 2025). In the comment discourse surrounding the UEC, hostility is frequently directed at political actors, particularly the government, the Prime Minister, UMNO, and DAP. Yet these attacks rarely remain purely political, because online aggression often reproduces broader social identity polarisation and stereotyping rather than remaining issue-specific (Manik et al., 2026; Retta, 2023). They draw their force from ethnolinguistic anxieties, especially when Chinese identity, vernacular education, national language, and political loyalty are collapsed into a single frame of suspicion. The result is a form of online aggression in which policy disagreement is transformed into

accusations of betrayal, deception, and national decline, a pattern consistent with impoliteness markers such as aspersions, accusations of lying, sarcasm, and stereotyping in political discourse (Esau, 2021).

The UEC occupies a sensitive position in Malaysia's educational and political landscape. As a qualification associated with Chinese independent secondary schools, it has repeatedly been drawn into wider debates on language rights, national identity, and the place of minority educational institutions within the national framework. Malaysian comment spaces have previously shown that racial and political attacks are common in user responses, and that social media discourse can reflect and contest Malaysian identity (Liew & Hassan, 2021). On TikTok, however, the issue is rarely discussed through policy reasoning alone. Comment sections attached to news-related videos often turn the UEC into a trigger for broader resentment toward the ruling administration, as online trolling and antagonistic discourse around education can function as a vehicle for dissent while undermining deliberative dialogue (Rashid & Ding, 2025). In such comments, the government is framed as weak, dishonest, or captured by ethnic interests; political parties are reduced to ethnic proxies; and the recognition of the UEC is constructed as evidence of compromised national loyalty. These patterns make TikTok comments a crucial site for examining how hate speech operates in Malaysian digital discourse, not only through explicit ethnic slurs but also through politically charged insinuation, collective blame, and identity-based delegitimation, especially because platform affordances shape visibility, interaction, and public discourse around sensitive political content (Liu, 2024).

This study treats hate speech as a pragmatic phenomenon rather than a fixed list of prohibited words, because the definition of hate speech is contextual, contested, and difficult to reduce to a universal list (Zamri et al., 2023; Maity et al., 2023; Kovács et al., 2021). Hate speech does not always appear as direct abuse against a protected group. It may surface through face attacks, sarcasm, insinuation, hostile labelling, and inciting formulations that make certain groups, leaders, or institutions appear dangerous, illegitimate, or morally contaminated, and hate speech on social media often works through insulting epithets and indirect discursive strategies that can evade moderation while reinforcing polarisation (Retta, 2023; Chetty & Alathur, 2018). Culpeper (2021) distinction between impoliteness and hate speech is useful here because it prevents the analysis from flattening all offensive language into the same category. Impoliteness and hate speech both involve offensive behaviour, but they are not identical: hate speech is more strongly associated with extreme behaviour, hurt, and prejudice directed at people through group membership (Culpeper, 2021; Esau, 2021). A comment becomes more analytically significant when political criticism is tied to ethnic betrayal, Chinese dominance, national collapse, or collective threat.

This study examines TikTok comments responding to netizen-generated video content related to a Buletin TV3 news report on the UEC issue. It aims to examine how hate speech is pragmatically constructed in the comments, particularly through government-directed hostility, ethnicised political blame, face attacks, incitement, and accountable forms of identity-based aggression. The study argues that hate speech in this corpus operates primarily through political delegitimation: the government becomes the visible target, while ethnicity supplies the deeper logic of suspicion. In doing so, the article contributes to pragmatics-based research on Malaysian online discourse by showing how a contested education issue can be transformed into a platform for political distrust, ethnic suspicion, and the reactivation of fragile national identity boundaries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Hate Speech as Pragmatic Action

Digital hate speech is not defined only by offensive vocabulary. Its force lies in what users accomplish through language: they shame, accuse, provoke, delegitimise, and invite others to align with hostile positions. In social media comment sections, this force is often produced through brief and highly compressed utterances, where comments function as hostile online communication aimed at insulting, degrading, or belittling target groups (Schmid et al., 2022; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021). Studies on online hate speech show that hateful expression is rarely limited to direct slurs. It may appear through speech acts, implicature, sarcasm, euphemism, stereotyping, metaphor, neologism, and hostile labelling (Retta, 2023; Guerra et al., 2025). These forms allow hostility to be expressed while preserving deniability, especially when users frame aggression as humour, criticism, or ordinary political opinion. This indirectness is crucial in politically sensitive discourse. A comment

may avoid explicit racial abuse but still construct a target as dangerous, disloyal, corrupt, or morally unworthy through implication and association. Malaysian work on 3R related hate speech further shows that directive speech acts, including requests, questions, and advice, can be prominent in online hate expression because they are designed to influence audience orientation rather than merely express dislike (Salleh & Yusof, 2026). Hate speech in comment threads should therefore be read as participatory action: it provokes, challenges, recruits' alignment, and attempts to move readers toward shared hostility.

Malaysian Social Media Context

Malaysian online hate speech is shaped by a public culture in which ethnicity, religion, political authority, language, and national identity are tightly intertwined (Jerome et al., 2024; Saidin & Azrun, 2024; Xia et al., 2018). Existing studies describe hate speech in Malaysia as a significant problem involving race, religion, and political antagonism, with the 3R frame of race, religion, and royalty repeatedly appearing in online disputes and public complaints (Zamri et al., 2023; Haron et al., 2025; Saidin & Azrun, 2024). The literature also stresses that defining hate speech in Malaysia is context-dependent, because it requires balancing freedom of expression against protection from discrimination, dehumanisation, and incitement (Zamri et al., 2023). The Malaysian context is distinctive because political issues frequently become racialised, while racial issues are often politicised. When policy questions are interpreted through ethnic loyalty, religious belonging, or national authenticity, ordinary disagreement can become exclusionary and stereotype-reinforcing. Social media intensifies this tendency by making hostile expression fast, visible, and repeatable. Comment, share, and recommendation affordances allow hateful or uncivil content to circulate beyond its immediate context, while perceived anonymity can reduce restraint and heighten verbal aggression. Existing Malaysian studies also link online hate to othering discourse, where targets are constructed as outside the moral, cultural, or national community (Zamri et al., 2023; Jerome et al., 2024). Social media intensifies this tendency by making hostile expression fast, visible, and easily repeatable (Haron et al., 2025). This is particularly relevant to language and education controversies, where technical policy debates often become symbolic disputes over belonging, legitimacy, and the imagined boundaries of the nation.

The UEC Debate as Political Delegitimation

The Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) is a standardised examination administered by the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia (Dong Zong) for students enrolled in Chinese independent secondary schools. Since its establishment in 1975, the UEC has occupied an anomalous position within Malaysia's national education framework: while it is widely recognised by universities in China, Taiwan, Singapore, and several Western countries, it has not been accorded formal recognition by the Malaysian government (Lee, 2004; Tan, 2012). This non-recognition has been a source of sustained controversy, periodically resurfacing in public discourse as successive administrations have debated whether to extend formal recognition to the qualification. The arguments advanced on each side of the debate are deeply ideological in character and cannot be reduced to purely educational or technocratic considerations. Proponents of UEC recognition, drawn predominantly from Chinese Malaysian civil society organisations and opposition political parties, frame the issue in terms of educational equity, linguistic rights, and the right of Chinese Malaysians to have their educational achievements formally validated within the national framework (Tan, 2012). Opponents, by contrast, frequently invoke concerns about national unity, the integrity of the national language, and the perceived separatism of the Chinese independent school system, arguing that recognition of the UEC would undermine the integrative function of the national education system (Lee, 2004; Noor, 2010). These competing framings ensure that the UEC debate is never merely a policy discussion but is always already saturated with ethnic meaning, rendering it a particularly potent site for the manifestation of identity-based aggression in public discourse. Thus, the UEC debate is a productive site for hate speech analysis because it sits at the intersection of education, language, ethnicity, and state legitimacy (Rashid & Ding, 2025; Lam et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2018). Debates over recognition exceed educational administration because they are often framed through national language, sovereignty, unity, and the place of vernacular education in Malaysia.

The present study reads the UEC debate through the lens of political delegitimation. Political delegitimation occurs when criticism shifts from opposing a policy to questioning the moral, national, or political legitimacy of the actors associated with it. In UEC-related discourse, government actors who support, tolerate, or are perceived

to legitimise UEC recognition can become visible targets of accusation. The issue then moves beyond education policy and becomes a discourse of betrayal, surrender, national decline, or ethnic capture. This is the gap addressed by the present study: existing work has examined Malaysian online hate, 3R discourse, othering, and UEC-related identity contestation, but less attention has been given to how TikTok comments pragmatically convert policy disagreement into government-directed hostility and ethnicised political blame. Therefore, to examine this process more precisely, this study adopts Culpeper's hate speech framework, which allows the analysis to distinguish ordinary impoliteness from more accountable forms of hate-laden discourse; and identify the hate speech dimension in the social media comment regarding this issue.

Culpeper's Hate Speech Framework

Culpeper (2021) distinguish ordinary impoliteness with hate speech as identical phenomena. Both involve offensive behaviour, but hate speech carries a more serious pragmatic force because it is associated with extremity, hurt, prejudice, and antagonism toward people based on group membership. Culpeper organises the relationship between impoliteness and hate speech through two analytical perspectives: first-order and second-order. **The first-order perspective** concerns how ordinary language users understand, label, and evaluate offensive behaviour. **The second-order perspective** refers to the analyst's theoretical interpretation of how hate speech works pragmatically. In this study, the first-order perspective is used to identify how utterances may be recognisable as impolite or hateful, while the second-order perspective provides the conceptual tools for explaining why particular utterances carry hate-speech force.

First-Order Perspective: Impolite and Hateful as Metapragmatic Evaluations

The first-order perspective focuses on lay understandings of offensive language. Culpeper examines the metalanguage surrounding terms such as impolite and hateful to show that these labels do not carry the same social meaning. **Impolite** tends to be associated with breaches of expected social conduct, while **hateful** is linked to more extreme forms of offence, emotional injury, prejudice, and hostility toward group identity. Operationally, this perspective allows the analysis to consider whether a comment functions merely as rude, aggressive, sarcastic, or insulting, or whether it moves into a more serious category of hateful discourse. The distinction matters because not every offensive expression should be treated as hate speech. An utterance may be impolite because it is crude, disrespectful, or confrontational. It becomes hateful when its evaluative force is tied to degradation, exclusion, prejudice, or antagonism against a person or group through identity-based meaning. For coding purposes, the first-order dimension may be observed through linguistic cues such as hostile labels, degrading descriptions, ridicule, mockery, sarcastic intensification, emotionally injurious wording, and expressions that invite readers to perceive a target as inferior, dangerous, corrupt, disloyal, or undeserving of social recognition. The analytical concern is not only whether the wording is offensive, but whether the utterance carries a recognisable hateful stance.

Second-Order Perspective: Analytical Concepts for Hate Speech

The second-order perspective provides the theoretical explanation for how hate speech operates as a pragmatic phenomenon. Culpeper identifies several key concepts that help clarify hate speech's dimensions: **face**, **incitement**, **intentionality**, **foreseeability**, and **accountability**. These concepts allow the researcher to examine hate speech not as isolated wording, but as social action with targets, audiences, effects, and responsibilities.

a) Face

Face is central to impoliteness research and is equally useful for hate speech analysis. Drawing on Goffman's notion of face and later developments such as Spencer-Oatey's concept of social identity face, Culpeper shows that offensive language may damage not only an individual's personal image but also the positive social value attached to group membership. Social identity face includes identity categories such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, political affiliation, and other collective memberships through which individuals claim dignity and recognition.

b) Incitement

Incitement is one of the strongest points of distinction between impoliteness and hate speech. Culpeper notes that incitement is more central to hate speech scholarship than to impoliteness studies because hate speech often seeks to influence how others think, feel, or act toward a target. Incitement is not limited to direct commands. It may operate through persuasion, slogans, threats, repeated accusations, or formulations that encourage an audience to adopt hostility.

c) Intentionality

Intentionality concerns whether the speaker meant to cause offence or produce hateful effects. Earlier impoliteness studies often treated intention as central to identifying genuine impoliteness. Culpeper complicates this view by arguing that offensive effects do not always depend on fully proven intention. An utterance may still be offensive, impolite, or hateful even when the speaker claims that no harm was intended.

d) Foreseeability

Foreseeability refers to whether the offensive or harmful effects of an utterance could reasonably have been anticipated. Culpeper treats foreseeability as a stronger analytical tool than actual intention because it shifts the focus from the inaccessible mind of the speaker to the predictable consequences of the utterance. If a speaker produces language that can reasonably be expected to demean, provoke, or intensify hostility toward a target, the utterance remains analytically significant even without proof of explicit intent.

e) Accountability

Accountability concerns whether the speaker can be held responsible for the social action performed by the utterance. Culpeper draws attention to the importance of accountability because hate speech analysis cannot depend entirely on proving a speaker's private intention. What matters is the meaning made available by the speech act and the extent to which the speaker can be held responsible for producing it. Operationally, accountability is identified when an utterance publicly produces meanings that demean, exclude, incite, or legitimise hostility toward a target. The speaker becomes accountable not only for the literal words used, but also for the evaluative stance and social implications carried by those words. This is particularly important in discourse analysis because utterances do not exist as neutral linguistic objects. They circulate, invite uptake, and create consequences within interaction. Accountability therefore functions as the final analytical checkpoint. If a comment attacks identity face, invites hostile alignment, or foreseeably strengthens prejudice, the speaker can be considered pragmatically accountable for the hate-laden meaning produced. This does not require legal judgement. It is an analytical judgement about language use, social meaning, and interactional responsibility.

Table 1 Culpeper's Hate Speech Framework

Hate Speech Dimensions	Operational Focus	Indicators in Discourse
First-order evaluation	How the utterance is recognisable as impolite or hateful	Insult, mockery, sarcasm, hostile labelling, degrading evaluation, prejudice-oriented wording
Face	How the utterance damages dignity, legitimacy, or social identity	Personal insult, group stereotyping, denial of belonging, humiliation, delegitimation
Incitement	How the utterance mobilises others against a target	Calls for rejection, punishment, exclusion, distrust, collective hostility, attitude-shaping slogans
Intentionality	How hostility is revealed through the utterance, rather than proven through inner motive	Deliberate target selection, repeated hostile stance, intensified wording, explicit or implied aggression

Foreseeability	Whether harmful or hostile effects could reasonably be anticipated	Predictable offence, likely intensification of hostility, inflammatory framing, identity-sensitive wording
Accountability	Whether the speaker can be held responsible for the social meaning produced	Publicly available hostile meaning, demeaning implication, inciting force, prejudice-reinforcing discourse

Table 1 outlines the operational categories used to analyse hate speech by distinguishing between first-order evaluations of impoliteness or hatefulness and second-order analytical dimensions such as face, incitement, intentionality, foreseeability, and accountability. It provides a systematic basis for identifying how offensive utterances move beyond ordinary impoliteness into hate-laden discourse through identity attack, hostile mobilisation, and accountable social meaning.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative method using content analysis towards TikTok comment discourse on the UEC issue. The data consisted of 222 comments crawled using the Chrome plugin *TTCCommentExporter* June 1, 2026. The comments were obtained from a public TikTok reaction video uploaded by the Malaysian user on 15 May 2026 which responded to news coverage concerning the issue of UEC admission recognition into Malaysian public universities (IPTA). The reaction video was selected because it generated public engagement with two related Buletin TV3 news items, namely “*Pelajar tahfiz, UEC berpeluang sambung IPTA*” (May 14, 2026) and “*Kerajaan perhalusi kemasukan UEC ke IPTA*” uploaded on May 15, 2026. These news items provided the immediate media context for the comments analysed in this study. The 222 comments were treated as naturally occurring digital discourse and analysed using Culpeper’s hate speech framework as the operational analytical lens. The analysis focused on first-order evaluations of impoliteness and hatefulness, followed by second-order dimensions comprising face attack, incitement, intentionality, foreseeability, and accountability. Each comment was examined for linguistic indicators show as hate speech. Since the comments were taken from a public platform, the analysis prioritised the linguistic content of the comments rather than the personal identities of commenters. Usernames were excluded from the analysis except where necessary to identify the public source of the video data. Before analysis, the dataset was screened to exclude comments that did not contain analysable linguistic content. 15 comments consisted of stickers or empty entries, while 18 comments contained only emojis or very brief non-substantive expressions. After this screening process, 189 substantive comments were retained as the final corpus for qualitative discourse analysis. Analysis on the 189 comments shows that 112 (59%) comments were identified as hate speech, and 77 (41%) comments were categorised as neutral or non-hate speech. This distribution indicates that the comment thread was not merely a space for policy discussion, but a highly charged discursive environment where hostility, political blame, and identity-based aggression were substantially present.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the second-order dimensions of hate speech because the analysis is concerned specifically with how hate speech operates as a pragmatic phenomenon. While Culpeper’s framework distinguishes between first-order and second-order perspectives, the present findings foreground the second-order categories of **face**, **incitement**, **intentionality**, **foreseeability**, and **accountability**. These categories allow the analysis to move beyond surface-level offensiveness by examining how TikTok comments attack identity, mobilise hostility, reveal deliberate aggression, produce foreseeable harm, and make speakers pragmatically accountable for the meanings they circulate. The analysis identified 112 comments containing hate speech elements from the 189 substantive comments retained for analysis. Each comment was coded according to its dominant second-order hate speech dimension. Table 2 shows the distribution of hate speech dimensions in TikTok comments on the UEC issue.

Table 2 Hate speech dimensions in TikTok comments on the UEC issue

Hate Speech Dimensions	Frequency	Percentage
Face attack	38	34%
Incitement	22	20%
Intentionality	19	17%
Foreseeability	18	16%
Accountability	15	13%
Total	112	100%

This table shows that hate speech in the corpus is dominated by attacks on face, particularly social identity face and institutional face. The distribution also indicates that hate speech in the UEC comment discourse does not operate only through explicit insults, but also through inciting formulations, deliberate hostile labelling, foreseeable ethnicised implications, and accountable forms of political delegitimation. Face attack constitutes the most prevalent dimension (34%), which is theoretically coherent given that the UEC debate is fundamentally a dispute over ethnic identity, linguistic rights, and social belonging precisely the conditions under which social identity face (Culpeper, 2021) becomes the primary target of hate-laden discourse.

a) Face

Face attack was the most dominant second-order dimension, accounting for 38 (34%) comments of the hate speech data. In Culpeper's discussion, face is important because hate speech damages not only the individual target but also the social value attached to group membership. Drawing on Spencer-Oatey's notion of social identity face, Culpeper (2021) shows that group identity, including ethnicity, religion, and nationality, can be incorporated into the analysis of face in hate speech. One of the clearest examples of face attack appears in the following comment:

"bawahan kerajaan ada cina mmg jadi Ah mcm tu" (#207)

[under a government with Chinese (members/representation), it definitely turns out like that]

The linguistic force of this comment lies in its ethnic labelling and inherent attribution. The expression *"ada cina"* (with Chinese members/representation) explicitly marks ethnicity as the basis of judgement, while the phrase *"mmg jadi"* (definitely) frames the negative behaviour as natural, predictable, or inherent. The use of *"Ah"* further functions as a derogatory ethnic stereotype. The comment therefore does not merely criticise an individual or a government decision; it constructs Chinese identity as the cause of institutional decline or undesirable political behaviour. This is a direct attack on social identity face because it damages the positive social value attached to Chinese Malaysian identity. The comment relies on a protected characteristic through ethnicity; and converts it into a negative explanatory category. Its hatefulness lies in the generalisation: the presence of Chinese parliament members within government-linked structures is presented as sufficient explanation for what the commenter sees as failure or corruption. This moves the utterance beyond ordinary political dissatisfaction into prejudice-based antagonism. The dominance of face attack in the corpus is significant. It shows that the UEC debate does not remain confined to education policy. Instead, commenters repeatedly transform policy disagreement into attacks on the dignity, legitimacy, or belonging of individuals and groups associated with the issue. In this sense, face attack becomes the main linguistic mechanism through which the UEC debate is racialised and politicised.

b) Incitement

Incitement formed the second most frequent dimension, with 22 (20%) comments. Culpeper treats incitement as especially relevant to hate speech because it involves more than the expression of hostility. It attempts to

influence an audience's attitude or behaviour toward a target. Incitement is therefore a complex illocutionary act involving at least three participants: the inciter, the incitee, and the target. A representative example is:

"PRU16 kita yg turun kan dia" (#6)

[In GE16, we'll be the ones taking him down]

The inclusive pronoun "*kita*" (we) is the key linguistic marker in this comment. It constructs a collective in-group and positions the audience as participants in a shared political project. The verb phrase "*turun kan*" (taking down) carries directive force: it urges collective action against "*dia*" (him), a target that is contextually understood as the political leader associated with the UEC issue which is the Prime Minister in this context. The reference to "*PRU 16*" (GE16) gives the incitement a concrete political frame, converting anger into a future electoral act. This comment does not use literal violent language, but its pragmatic force is still inciting. It mobilises the audience toward collective rejection and political punishment. In Culpeper's terms, incitement may operate not only by directing a specific act but also by changing the audience's attitude toward the target. This comment does both: it frames the target as someone who must be removed and positions the audience as responsible for carrying out that removal. The importance of incitement in this corpus lies in its collective orientation. TikTok comments are not private complaints. They are public performances of stance. A comment such as this does not simply express dissatisfaction; it recruits others into a shared hostile alignment. This is where hate speech becomes socially consequential: it does not end with insult but moves toward mobilisation.

c) Intentionality

Intentionality accounted for 19 (17%) comments of the hate speech data. In hate speech analysis, intentionality does not require direct access to the speaker's private mental state. Culpeper's discussion shows that intention is difficult to prove, and that analysts often need to focus on the intention revealed by the utterance itself. This is important because hostile speakers can deny hateful intent after producing harmful discourse. The following comment illustrate intentionality:

"bapa auta negara" (#155)

[The country's biggest conman]

The phrase "*bapa auta negara*" is not a spontaneous insult without structure. It is a deliberate modification of an honorific national frame. The expression echoes the symbolic pattern of titles such as "*Bapa Malaysia*" (The Father of Malaysia) but replaces positive national recognition with "*auta*" (conman), a colloquial term associated with deception or falsehood. This lexical substitution is calculated. It exploits intertextual familiarity to intensify the attack on the target's dignity and credibility. The comment therefore reveals intentionality through its linguistic design. The insult is not merely abusive; it is crafted to delegitimise the target at the level of national symbolism. By attaching deception to the figure of national leadership, the comment attacks institutional face and dignity face simultaneously. Its force lies in making the target appear not simply wrong, but fundamentally fraudulent. This finding is important because much of the hate-laden discourse in the corpus is politically directed. Not every political insult should automatically be treated as hate speech. However, when a comment deliberately reconstructs national symbols to humiliate a political actor and intensify public contempt, the utterance carries a higher degree of pragmatic aggression. The intentionality is visible in the wording itself.

d) Foreseeability

Foreseeability appeared in 18 (16%) comments of the hate speech data. Culpeper's discussion of foreseeability shifts the analysis away from the impossible task of proving inner motive. The central question is whether the speaker should reasonably have anticipated the offensive or harmful effects of the utterance. Culpeper notes that a producer may be blamed for failing to predict possible offensive effects, especially when the utterance is likely to demean or stir hostility. One example is:

"hancur negara ni" (#169)

[this country is doomed]

On the surface, this comment appears brief and general. It does not name an ethnic group, political party, or individual. However, the phrase *"hancur negara"* (country is doomed) carries a strong semantic load. The verb *"hancur"* (doomed) evokes total destruction, collapse, and irreversible damage. In the context of the UEC debate, the comment implies that recognition or consideration of the UEC is not merely a policy mistake but a threat to the nation itself. The hate-laden force of this comment lies in its foreseeable implication. Given the ethnic sensitivity of the UEC issue, the claim that the country will be destroyed can reasonably be expected to intensify suspicion toward the group associated with the issue. The comment does not need to say "Chinese" explicitly for the implication to be socially available. Its meaning is produced through context: UEC is linked to Chinese independent schools, and the policy discussion is reframed as national destruction. This is why foreseeability is analytically useful. It captures comments that avoid explicit slurs but still generate predictable hostile meanings. The speaker may claim to be expressing concern for the country, yet the phrasing foreseeably strengthens an exclusionary frame: one group's educational claim is positioned as a danger to national survival.

e) Accountability

Accountability was identified in 15 (13%) comments of the hate speech data. Accountability refers to whether the speaker can be held responsible for the social meaning produced by the utterance. Culpeper, drawing on work in pragmatics and hate speech scholarship, emphasises that accountability frees the analysis from dependence on the speaker's actual intention. What matters is the meaning revealed by the speech act and the speaker's responsibility for producing it. The following comment illustrates accountability:

"dpt kuasa terserlah sikap sebenarnya non, blm dapat kuasa semua dia tentang mcm2, bila dpt kuasa menikus" (#199)

[Power has revealed their true colors, man! Before they were in power, they protested everything under the sun; once they got power, they cowed in silence.]

This comment constructs a narrative of hypocrisy and cowardice. The contrastive structure *"blm dpt kuasa... bila dpt kuasa"* (before they were in power ... once they got power) presents the target as morally inconsistent before and after gaining power. The term *"menikus"* (cowed in silence) metaphorically reduces the target to a timid or opportunistic figure, while *"non"* (man) functions as a derogatory label within the comment's hostile register. Together, these linguistic choices produce a calculated degradation of the target's public character. The speaker may frame the utterance as political commentary, but the comment does more than criticise policy. It publicly demeans the target and constructs a negative moral identity through hostile metaphor, contrast, and labelling. From the perspective of accountability, the speaker is responsible for the social meaning produced: the target is not merely criticised as politically mistaken but represented as cowardly, deceptive, and unworthy of authority. This dimension is especially important in social media analysis because hate speech often survives through deniability. Users can claim that they are only joking, criticising, or venting. Accountability prevents such disclaimers from erasing the pragmatic force of the utterance. If the speech act produces degradation, hostile alignment, or identity-based delegitimation, the speaker remains accountable for the meaning circulated in public discourse.

The findings show that hate speech in TikTok comments are dominance of face attack which indicates that the main harm is not ordinary verbal rudeness, but the degradation of identity, dignity, and legitimacy. While some comments contain explicit ethnic hostility, others operate through political delegitimation by attacking the Prime Minister, UMNO, DAP, and the government. This pattern shows that the visible target is often political, but the underlying logic of hostility remains ethnicised. The second-order framework makes this pattern clearer by showing how hate speech works beyond direct slurs. Face explains attacks on dignity and group identity; incitement shows how commenters recruit others into collective hostility; intentionality reveals deliberate linguistic aggression; foreseeability explains how indirect comments still produce predictable harmful meanings; and accountability establishes responsibility for the hostile meanings circulated. The prevalence of face attacks

and incitement in the present data should also be interpreted within the communicative environment of TikTok, where brief, highly visible, and rapidly circulated comments may encourage direct and polarised expressions. Therefore, the patterns identified in this study should not automatically be generalised to other social media platforms with different interactional structures and user cultures. Overall, the UEC TikTok discourse transforms an education-policy issue into a discourse of betrayal, ethnic suspicion, and political illegitimacy.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that hate speech in TikTok comments on the UEC issue is not produced only through explicit ethnic slurs or direct abuse. Its stronger pattern lies in the way government-directed hostility becomes entangled with ethnicised political blame. The findings indicate that face attack is the most dominant second-order dimension, followed by incitement, intentionality, foreseeability, and accountability. This pattern suggests that the UEC debate is transformed from an education-policy issue into a discourse of political betrayal, national anxiety, and identity-based suspicion. Through hostile labels, sarcastic delegitimation, collective blame, and inciting formulations, commenters construct political actors and associated groups as morally compromised, disloyal, or threatening to the national order. By applying Culpeper's second-order framework, this study demonstrates that hate speech should not be reduced to offensive vocabulary alone. Its force lies in the pragmatic work performed by the utterance: damaging social identity face, mobilising hostile alignment, producing foreseeable harm, and making speakers accountable for the meanings they circulate. The study contributes to Malaysian hate speech research by showing how TikTok comment discourse allows political criticism to slide into identity-based aggression, especially when ethnicity functions as the hidden logic beneath attacks on government legitimacy. This study is limited to publicly available TikTok comments concerning the UEC issue and therefore does not represent the full range of hate speech practices across Malaysia's social media landscape. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing UEC-related discourse across platforms such as Facebook, X, and YouTube, to examine how hate speech shifts according to audience, media ecology, and issue framing. Further attention should also be given to less explicit forms of hostility, including sarcasm, coded expressions, insinuation, and indirect identity-based attacks, which may not be immediately identifiable through overt lexical aggression.

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