

Humble-Bragging in Digital Discourse: A Lexical-Pragmatic Analysis of Indirect Self-Promotion on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study examines humble-bragging as a form of indirect self-presentation in digital discourse through a lexical-pragmatic analysis of 1,001 social media posts. Drawing on corpus linguistics, sentiment analysis, and pragmatic interpretation, the study investigates the linguistic patterns, collocational tendencies, and communicative functions that characterise humble-bragging on social media platforms. Guided by Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and politeness theory, the analysis demonstrates how humble-bragging operates through strategic violations of conversational maxims, particularly those of Quality and Quantity, to generate implicatures that subtly foreground personal achievements while maintaining an appearance of modesty. The findings identify two dominant forms of humble-bragging: complaint-based variants, which frame success as burden or inconvenience through negative affect language, and humility-based variants, which employ gratitude and modesty markers to present achievements as undeserved or externally attributed. Nevertheless, many posts display hybrid pragmatic features that blur the distinction between these categories, suggesting that humble-bragging functions along a broader continuum of indirect self-promotion. The study further highlights the interpretive ambiguity of humble-bragging, as its meaning relies heavily on audience inference and contextual understanding. These findings contribute to research on digital discourse, speech acts, politeness, and online self-presentation by offering a nuanced account of how users negotiate modesty and visibility in contemporary social media communication.

Keywords: humble-bragging, pragmatics, speech acts, corpus linguistics, social media

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has transformed contemporary practices of self-presentation, particularly within digital environments where visibility, personal branding, and public recognition are increasingly embedded in everyday communication. Platforms such as X, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn encourage users to curate desirable online identities while simultaneously navigating social expectations surrounding modesty and authenticity. Within this context, humble-bragging has emerged as a distinctive discursive strategy through which speakers indirectly promote themselves by disguising self-praise as complaint, frustration, or humility. Expressions such as "I'm exhausted from travelling for conferences again" or "I still cannot believe I was invited to speak at another event" illustrate how achievement may be communicated indirectly while maintaining an appearance of modesty or self-deprecation.

Humble-bragging represents a complex form of indirect self-presentation that relies heavily on audience inference and pragmatic interpretation. Although the surface meaning of the utterance may appear negative, modest, or emotionally restrained, the implied meaning frequently foregrounds accomplishment, privilege, or social desirability. Its communicative effectiveness depends on the audience's ability to recognise the implicit boast embedded within the utterance. In this sense, humble-bragging reflects a strategic negotiation between self-promotion and adherence to social norms that discourage overt boasting. The practice derives much of its pragmatic complexity from its reliance on implicature, ambiguity, and the deliberate manipulation of conversational expectations.

Existing research on humble-bragging has predominantly approached the phenomenon from psychological and behavioural perspectives, particularly in relation to impression management, audience perception, and interpersonal evaluation. Sezer et al. (2018), for example, demonstrated that humble-bragging is frequently perceived more negatively than direct boasting due to its perceived insincerity and manipulative intent. While such studies provide valuable insight into audience responses, the linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms underlying humble-bragging remain comparatively underexplored. In particular, limited attention has been given to the lexical patterns, collocational tendencies, and pragmatic structures through which humble-bragging is constructed in naturally occurring digital discourse. Furthermore, existing studies often rely on binary distinctions between complaint-based and humility-based humble-brags, despite the possibility that many online utterances contain overlapping or hybrid pragmatic features that resist rigid categorisation.

The communicative structure of humble-bragging may be more effectively understood through frameworks within pragmatics and discourse analysis. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) provides a useful foundation for examining how humble-bragging functions as an indirect speech act in which the speaker's primary illocutionary intention of boasting is concealed beneath a secondary communicative form such as complaint or gratitude. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle further explains how humble-bragging operates through strategic violations of conversational maxims, particularly those of Quality and Quantity, to generate implicatures that guide audiences toward implied meanings. At the same time, politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983) offers insight into how speakers manage face concerns by presenting self-promotion in socially acceptable forms that minimise the appearance of arrogance while preserving positive self-image.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates humble-bragging as a lexical-pragmatic phenomenon in digital discourse through a corpus-based analysis of 1,001 social media posts. Combining corpus linguistics, sentiment analysis, and qualitative pragmatic interpretation, the study examines the lexical features, collocational patterns, and communicative functions that characterise humble-bragging on social media platforms. Particular attention is given to the distinctions and overlaps between complaint-based, humility-based, and hybrid forms of humble-bragging, as well as the role of implicature in shaping audience interpretation. By examining how indirect self-promotion is linguistically constructed and pragmatically negotiated in online communication, this study contributes to broader discussions within speech act theory, politeness theory, digital discourse analysis, and contemporary studies of online self-presentation.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

- RQ1: What are the distinctive lexical features and collocational patterns that characterise humble-bragging in social media discourse?
- RQ2: How do complaint-based, humility-based, and hybrid humble-brags differ in their linguistic construction and pragmatic function?
- RQ3: To what extent do humble-bragging posts conform to or violate Grice's conversational maxims, and what pragmatic implicatures emerge from these violations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humble-bragging has emerged as a distinctive communicative strategy within contemporary digital discourse, particularly in environments where online visibility, personal branding, and audience engagement increasingly shape everyday interaction. The phenomenon generally refers to a form of indirect self-promotion in which speakers attempt to present achievements, privilege, or desirability while simultaneously masking overt self-praise through complaint, humility, frustration, or self-deprecation. Although humble-bragging has become widely recognisable within social media culture, its communicative complexity extends beyond simple self-promotion. The phenomenon operates through layered pragmatic meanings, audience inference, and strategic ambiguity, making it particularly relevant to studies in pragmatics, discourse analysis, and digital communication.

Existing scholarship has largely approached humble-bragging from psychological and behavioural perspectives. Sezer et al. (2018), whose work remains foundational in the field, define humble-bragging as “bragging masked by complaint or humility” and argue that audiences generally perceive humble-braggers more negatively than individuals who boast directly. According to their findings, humble-bragging frequently produces impressions of insincerity, manipulation, and strategic self-presentation because audiences recognise the concealed boast beneath the apparent modesty. Their work significantly contributed to understanding the interpersonal consequences of humble-bragging and highlighted the social risks associated with indirect self-praise. Nevertheless, while psychological studies have examined audience evaluations and behavioural responses, comparatively limited attention has been given to the linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms through which humble-bragging is constructed and interpreted in naturally occurring discourse.

The communicative structure of humble-bragging may be more effectively understood through Speech Act Theory, particularly in relation to indirect speech acts and pragmatic intention. Austin (1962) conceptualised language as performative action rather than merely a vehicle for conveying information. His distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts provides an important framework for understanding the layered nature of humble-bragging. In many instances, the locutionary act appears to express frustration, humility, or disbelief, while the underlying illocutionary force functions as self-promotion. The resulting perlocutionary effect may include admiration, sympathy, envy, or irritation depending on how audiences interpret the utterance. This distinction is particularly relevant in digital discourse where indirect meanings frequently rely on audience interpretation rather than explicit linguistic declaration.

Searle’s (1969, 1975) work on indirect speech acts further clarifies how speakers communicate meanings that differ from the literal form of the utterance. In indirect speech acts, speakers rely on audiences to infer communicative intentions through contextual and pragmatic cues rather than direct expression. Humble-bragging exemplifies this process because its effectiveness depends on the audience’s ability to recognise the discrepancy between surface meaning and implied meaning. A statement such as “I am exhausted from attending conferences every week” functions simultaneously as complaint and self-promotion. The complaint structure provides plausible deniability while still directing attention toward professional success or social prestige. The pragmatic force of humble-bragging therefore lies not in explicit boasting but in strategic implication.

The inferential dimension of humble-bragging may also be explained through Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle and the associated conversational maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Humble-bragging frequently relies on strategic violations or flouting of these maxims in order to generate implicatures. In many cases, speakers appear to violate the Maxim of Quality by presenting exaggerated frustration or false modesty that conceals a positive self-presentation motive. Similarly, violations of the Maxim of Quantity emerge when speakers provide selectively incomplete information that encourages audiences to infer achievements indirectly. Rather than constituting communicative failure, these violations operate as deliberate pragmatic strategies that invite audiences to participate in meaning construction.

The role of implicature is central to understanding why humble-bragging often produces interpretive ambiguity. As Thomas (1995) argues, implicature depends upon shared assumptions and contextual understanding between speaker and listener. Consequently, the success or failure of humble-bragging is heavily dependent on audience interpretation. Some audiences may perceive indirect self-praise as humorous, relatable, or socially acceptable, while others may interpret the same utterance as manipulative or disingenuous. This interpretive instability is especially pronounced within social media discourse where communication occurs asynchronously and frequently lacks paralinguistic cues such as tone of voice, facial expression, or immediate interactional feedback. In such environments, lexical choices and structural patterns become particularly important for signalling implied meanings.

The relationship between humble-bragging and politeness theory further illustrates the social complexity of indirect self-presentation. Brown and Levinson (1987) describe boasting as a potentially face-threatening act because excessive self-praise may damage interpersonal relationships and create negative social evaluations. Speakers therefore frequently employ politeness strategies to minimise the appearance of arrogance while preserving positive self-image. Humble-bragging may be interpreted as one such strategy because it allows

individuals to communicate achievements indirectly while maintaining the appearance of modesty or relatability. By embedding self-praise within complaint or humility, speakers attempt to negotiate competing social expectations surrounding visibility, success, and modest conduct.

Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, particularly the Modesty Maxim, also provides important insight into the pragmatic structure of humble-bragging. The Modesty Maxim encourages speakers to minimise praise of self and maximise praise of others. Humble-bragging appears superficially consistent with this principle because the speaker avoids direct boasting. However, the pragmatic effect often produces the opposite outcome by indirectly foregrounding accomplishments through implication. This creates a tension between surface modesty and underlying self-promotion, illustrating how politeness strategies may themselves become instruments of impression management. Such tensions are particularly significant in digital communication environments where users are simultaneously expected to appear authentic, relatable, and socially successful.

The relationship between humble-bragging and impression management can also be situated within Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation. Goffman argues that individuals strategically manage social performances in order to shape how they are perceived by others. Social media platforms intensify this performative dimension because users operate within highly visible environments characterised by metrics of approval such as likes, comments, reposts, and follower counts. Consequently, online discourse increasingly involves careful negotiation between authenticity and self-branding. Humble-bragging may therefore be understood as a performative strategy that allows users to display accomplishment while simultaneously protecting themselves from accusations of arrogance or excessive self-promotion.

This tension between visibility and modesty has become increasingly relevant in digital culture where self-disclosure and self-promotion are often algorithmically rewarded. Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that social media users engage in ongoing forms of micro-celebrity practice in which visibility and audience management become central aspects of online participation. Similarly, Zappavigna (2012) notes that social media discourse frequently involves affiliation-building through strategic linguistic performance. Within such environments, humble-bragging functions as a socially negotiated mechanism for balancing personal promotion with acceptable norms of modesty. The phenomenon reflects broader transformations in contemporary communication where individuals are encouraged to maintain visibility while simultaneously avoiding overt self-aggrandisement.

Research on humble-bragging in digital communication has also highlighted the importance of lexical and structural cues in signalling indirect self-promotion. Corpus-based studies have identified recurring lexical markers associated with humble-bragging, including expressions of exhaustion, gratitude, disbelief, and frustration. Maíz-Arévalo (2019), for instance, examined self-praise and bragging practices on Facebook and observed how users employ humour, irony, and modesty markers to soften overt self-promotion. Similarly, studies by Lari et al. (2019) identified recurring lexical patterns such as "tired," "blessed," "grateful," and "lucky," which frequently function as pragmatic indicators of concealed boasting. These studies demonstrate that humble-bragging relies heavily on strategic lexical selection to construct indirect meanings.

Despite these contributions, existing corpus-based research remains comparatively limited in several important respects. First, many studies focus primarily on identifying lexical indicators without sufficiently integrating broader pragmatic frameworks such as implicature, speech act theory, or politeness theory. As a result, humble-bragging is often treated as a lexical phenomenon rather than a complex communicative strategy involving layered interpretation and audience inference. Second, existing scholarship frequently maintains a rigid distinction between complaint-based and humility-based humble-brags without adequately addressing hybrid forms that combine multiple pragmatic strategies simultaneously. In practice, many social media posts blur the boundaries between complaint, gratitude, irony, humour, and self-promotion, suggesting that humble-bragging may function along a broader continuum of indirect self-presentation rather than within clearly separable categories.

The issue of ambiguity is particularly significant because humble-bragging frequently relies on ironic or ambivalent discourse. Irony detection studies in computational linguistics have demonstrated that surface sentiment often differs substantially from pragmatic intention (Reyes et al., 2013). This creates important

methodological challenges for studies employing sentiment analysis because positive or negative lexical polarity does not always correspond directly to communicative meaning. A humble-brag framed as complaint may contain predominantly negative vocabulary while simultaneously performing a positive self-presentational function. Conversely, expressions of gratitude or humility may conceal strategic self-promotion beneath seemingly positive sentiment. Such complexities indicate that quantitative sentiment analysis alone may be insufficient for capturing the full pragmatic dimensions of humble-bragging without accompanying qualitative interpretation.

The role of audience interpretation remains another underexplored area within existing scholarship. Although Sezer et al. (2018) demonstrated that humble-bragging often generates negative evaluations, less attention has been given to how audiences negotiate meaning across different digital contexts. Audience responses to humble-bragging may vary according to cultural expectations, platform conventions, interpersonal familiarity, and ideological positioning. In collectivist contexts where modesty is highly valued, indirect self-promotion may be perceived differently than in cultures that normalise explicit self-branding and individual achievement. Likewise, humble-bragging on professional platforms such as LinkedIn may operate differently from humble-bragging on platforms oriented toward entertainment or casual interaction such as TikTok or X. These variations suggest that humble-bragging cannot be fully understood without considering the sociocultural and platform-specific conditions within which it occurs.

The affordances of digital platforms themselves also shape how humble-bragging is performed and interpreted. Social media communication is frequently characterised by brevity, fragmentation, and asynchronous interaction. Twitter/X, for example, encourages compressed forms of discourse that rely heavily on implication, lexical economy, and contextual inference. TikTok introduces multimodal dimensions involving gesture, performance, and visual self-branding, while LinkedIn institutionalises forms of professional self-promotion through achievement narratives framed as inspiration or reflection. These differences indicate that humble-bragging is not merely an individual communicative choice but also a platform-conditioned discourse practice shaped by technological affordances and audience expectations.

Taken together, the existing literature demonstrates that humble-bragging represents a complex intersection of speech acts, politeness, self-presentation, and digital discourse. Nevertheless, important gaps remain in understanding how humble-bragging operates linguistically and pragmatically within naturally occurring social media interaction. Existing research has yet to fully integrate corpus linguistic analysis with broader pragmatic frameworks capable of explaining implicature, audience inference, ambiguity, and hybrid communicative forms. Furthermore, while previous studies have focused heavily on psychological evaluations of humble-bragging, less attention has been devoted to the specific lexical and collocational patterns through which indirect self-promotion is constructed and negotiated online.

The present study addresses these gaps through a lexical-pragmatic analysis of 1,001 social media posts. By combining corpus linguistics, sentiment analysis, and qualitative pragmatic interpretation, the study seeks to examine how humble-bragging operates as a strategic form of indirect self-presentation in digital discourse. Particular attention is given to the lexical features, collocational tendencies, and pragmatic structures associated with complaint-based, humility-based, and hybrid forms of humble-bragging, as well as the role of implicature in shaping audience interpretation. In doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions concerning speech acts, politeness, digital discourse, and the evolving dynamics of self-presentation in contemporary online communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a corpus-assisted lexical-pragmatic approach to investigate humble-bragging as a form of indirect self-presentation in digital discourse. Combining corpus linguistics, sentiment analysis, and qualitative pragmatic interpretation, the study examines how humble-bragging is linguistically constructed and pragmatically negotiated across social media interaction. The methodological framework is grounded in Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and politeness theory, which collectively provide analytical tools for examining how speakers communicate implied meanings through indirect discourse strategies. The use of a

mixed-method approach allows both quantitative identification of recurring lexical and collocational patterns and qualitative interpretation of pragmatic functions, implicatures, and audience-oriented self-presentation strategies.

A corpus-based approach was selected because humble-bragging frequently relies on recurring lexical signals, formulaic expressions, and patterned pragmatic constructions that become more visible when analysed across large datasets. Corpus linguistics enables the systematic examination of word frequency, collocational tendencies, semantic patterns, and recurring discourse structures within naturally occurring communication. However, since humble-bragging often involves ambiguity, irony, and layered pragmatic meanings, quantitative analysis alone was considered insufficient. Consequently, corpus findings were supplemented with qualitative pragmatic interpretation to examine how indirect self-promotion operates beyond surface lexical meaning. This combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of how humble-bragging functions as a socially strategic speech act in digital environments.

The data for this study were collected primarily from Twitter, now known as X, between January 2022 and June 2025, with the majority of the corpus gathered during June 2025. This timeframe was selected to capture contemporary patterns of digital self-presentation within a period characterised by intensified online visibility, personal branding practices, and platform-driven audience engagement. Twitter/X was chosen because its character-limited structure encourages compressed and highly inferential forms of communication in which users frequently rely on implication, ambiguity, and strategic lexical selection to communicate meaning efficiently. The platform's public and interaction-oriented environment also makes it particularly suitable for examining indirect self-presentation strategies such as humble-bragging, which often depend on audience recognition and social interpretation.

The corpus was constructed through a combination of hashtag searches and keyword-based searches designed to identify posts containing potential instances of humble-bragging. Hashtag searches included terms commonly associated with indirect self-promotion and performative modesty, including #humblebrag, #blessed, #grateful, #thankful, #soblessed, #lucky, and #firstworldproblems. These hashtags were selected because they frequently function as markers of self-disclosure, gratitude performance, or complaint-based self-presentation in online discourse. In addition to hashtag searches, keyword searches were developed based on preliminary observations and lexical patterns identified in previous studies on humble-bragging and self-praise in digital communication (Sezer et al., 2018; Maíz-Arévalo, 2019).

The keyword searches were organised into several lexical categories. Complaint-oriented expressions included phrases such as “so tired of,” “exhausted,” “ugh,” “hate when,” and “too busy,” which frequently frame achievement as inconvenience or burden. Humility-oriented expressions included phrases such as “so grateful,” “cannot believe I,” “never thought I would,” “somehow I,” and “do not deserve,” which often position accomplishments as externally attributed or undeserved. Achievement-related lexical markers included references to promotions, awards, publications, invitations, conferences, recognitions, and professional success. Additional searches also included modesty markers such as “just,” “only,” “kind of,” “sort of,” and “little,” particularly when these appeared alongside achievement-oriented language. The purpose of combining these lexical categories was to capture both explicit and implicit forms of humble-bragging across different communicative styles.

Following the initial data collection process, the dataset underwent manual screening and refinement to identify pragmatically valid instances of humble-bragging. Posts were included in the corpus when they combined lexical indicators of complaint, humility, disbelief, or self-deprecation with explicit or implied references to personal achievement, privilege, desirability, or social recognition. Posts containing direct boasting without indirect framing were excluded, as were posts lacking any identifiable self-promotional implication. Ambiguous cases were examined contextually in relation to lexical choices, pragmatic intention, and implied meaning rather than solely surface sentiment. This interpretive process was necessary because humble-bragging frequently operates through implication and ambiguity rather than explicit declaration.

To improve coding reliability, two trained researchers independently coded a subset of 200 posts using predefined pragmatic criteria derived from previous literature and preliminary corpus observations. The coding framework focused on identifying complaint-based humble-brags, humility-based humble-brags, and hybrid forms containing overlapping pragmatic features. Complaint-based humble-brags were operationally defined as posts that framed achievement through expressions of frustration, inconvenience, exhaustion, or burden. Humility-based humble-brags were defined as posts that framed success through gratitude, disbelief, modesty, or external attribution. Hybrid forms referred to posts containing both complaint-oriented and humility-oriented strategies simultaneously or displaying ambiguous pragmatic functions that resisted rigid categorisation. Intercoder reliability testing produced a Cohen's Kappa score of 0.83, indicating strong agreement between coders. Following reliability testing, the remaining dataset was coded by a single researcher using the same operational framework.

The final corpus consisted of 1,001 unique social media posts containing identifiable instances of humble-bragging. This corpus size is comparable to datasets used in previous corpus-assisted studies of digital discourse and pragmatic analysis (Dayter, 2018; Maíz-Arévalo, 2019). Usernames, profile identifiers, and other personally identifiable information were excluded from the dataset to preserve anonymity and minimise ethical concerns associated with digital data collection. Since the analysis focused exclusively on publicly accessible posts, the study did not involve private communication or direct user interaction. Nevertheless, all examples were treated as discourse data rather than personal testimony, and identifying details were omitted to ensure ethical handling of online material.

The analytical process combined lexical frequency analysis, collocation analysis, sentiment analysis, and qualitative pragmatic interpretation. Frequency analysis was conducted to identify recurring lexical items associated with humble-bragging across the corpus. Particular attention was given to self-reference markers, achievement-oriented vocabulary, intensifiers, negation markers, and emotional expressions. Collocation analysis was subsequently employed to examine recurring lexical associations and identify patterns surrounding key discourse markers such as “so,” “just,” “grateful,” and “tired.” These collocational patterns were analysed in relation to their pragmatic functions within humble-bragging constructions.

Sentiment analysis was incorporated to examine the emotional orientation of humble-bragging posts and identify differences between complaint-based and humility-based forms. However, sentiment analysis was treated as a supplementary analytical tool rather than a definitive measure of communicative meaning. This limitation is particularly important because humble-bragging frequently involves irony, sarcasm, and indirect implication, all of which complicate straightforward polarity classification. Posts containing negative lexical markers may simultaneously function as positive self-promotion, while expressions of gratitude may conceal strategic self-enhancement beneath positive sentiment. Consequently, sentiment findings were interpreted alongside qualitative pragmatic analysis rather than independently.

The qualitative pragmatic analysis focused on how humble-bragging generated implicatures through strategic violations of Grice's conversational maxims, particularly those of Quality and Quantity. The analysis examined how speakers employed complaint, modesty, gratitude, exaggeration, or disbelief to indirectly foreground personal achievement while maintaining plausible deniability. Special attention was also given to audience-oriented meaning construction, ambiguity, and hybrid pragmatic forms that blurred distinctions between complaint and humility. By integrating corpus-based analysis with qualitative pragmatic interpretation, the methodology seeks to capture both the linguistic regularities and interpretive complexities that characterise humble-bragging in contemporary digital discourse.

FINDINGS

The following section presents the key findings from the lexical-pragmatic analysis of 1,001 social media posts that included instances of humble-bragging. By combining corpus linguistics, sentiment analysis, and speech act theory, the study identifies distinctive linguistic patterns and pragmatic markers that differentiate complaint-based from humility-based humble-brags. These findings highlight the two-faceted nature of humble-bragging, where speakers intentionally combine modest or disparaging remarks with self-promotion. The research also

reveals consistent violations of Grice's conversational maxims, which contributes to the indirectness and pragmatic complexity of the speech act. When taken as a whole, these results help us better understand how humble-bragging functions as a socially coded digital self-presentation technique.

Frequency Analysis

The frequency analysis revealed distinct lexical patterns characteristic of humble-bragging. Table 1 presents the corpus's top 10 most frequent words after removing stop words.

Table 1: Top 10 Frequent Words in Humble-Braggs

Word	Frequency
Not	231
M	154
Get	115
Like	102
Tired	73
Award	72
People	71
Win	70
Good	59
S	59

The prevalence of negation ("not") is particularly noteworthy, as it often functions to create contrast or denial in humblebrags (e.g., "can't believe I won," "not complaining about all these opportunities"). The high frequency of first-person references ("m" as in "I'm") confirms the self-focused nature of humble-bragging as a speech act centered on personal experiences and achievements. The existence of achievement-specific words ("award," "win") and complaint markers ("tired") demonstrates the twofold essence of the humblebrags that, as a rule, contain either self-reference and achievement or self-reference and complaint components.

The contraction of "I am" ("m") is used a lot, which indicates that humble-bragging is more informal and conversational. This aligns with the common usage of the speech act in social media, where the language is informal. The word "get" is commonly used as an achievement marker (e.g., "just got promoted"), whereas the word "like" can be used in various ways, such as comparison, approximation, or quotative. The word cloud visualisation (Figure 1) further illustrates the dominant lexical patterns in the corpus, with prominent words including "not," "m," "get," "like," "tired," "award," "people," and "win."



Figure 1: Word Cloud of Frequent Words in Humble-Braggs

Word cloud image showing the most frequent words in the corpus, with larger words indicating higher frequency.

The visual representation highlights the central role of negation, self-reference, and achievement terms in humble-bragging, providing an intuitive overview of the lexical landscape of this speech act.

Collocation Analysis

Collocation analysis focused on two key discourse markers frequently associated with humble bragging: "so" and "just." Tables 2 and 3 present the top 10 collocates for each marker.

Table 2: Collocations for 'so'

Collocate	Frequency
So	212
I	111
M	45
Tired	45
To	45
For	42
From	39
And	36
The	35
Grateful	32

Table 3: Collocations for 'just'

Collocate	Frequency
Just	159
I	44
To	32
The	30
And	30
Ugh	28
A	23
Got	22
Be	18
So	15

Important pragmatic strategies for humble-bragging are identified through the analysis of collocation patterns. An important element that raises the emotional tone of both variations is the intensifier "so," which is commonly used with both complaint markers (such as "so tired") and humility markers (such as "so grateful"). Prepositions like "to," "for," and "from" usually follow "so," resulting in phrases like "so tired from," "so grateful for," or "so lucky to," which subtly relate the speaker's emotional state to an underlying achievement.

Additionally, to minimise accomplishments while maintaining a self-promotional goal, the humility marker "just" is frequently used in conjunction with achievement-related verbs ("got," "won") and self-referential pronouns ("I"). Its co-occurrence with complaint cues like "ugh" supports its use in complaint-based humblebrags. The combination of "so" and "just" in phrases like "just so tired from this award ceremony" creates a multi-layered term that combines modesty and emphasis, emphasising how complex and self-centred humblebragging is.

These collocation patterns provide insight into the syntactic and pragmatic structure of humble-brags, revealing how key discourse markers create the tension between complaint/humility and boasting that defines this speech act.

Distribution of Humble-Brag Categories

The humble-brag classification demonstrated its distribution among three groups: Complaint-Based, Humility-Based, and Other (posts with humble-brags but did not fall under the previous two categories clearly). Although the exact distribution percentages were not reported in the analysis output, the following analyses show a significant proportion of complaint-based and humility-based humblebrag in the corpus, with a larger percentage of the latter being in the Other category. This implies that many humble-brags use hybrid approaches or other wordings that do not fit well into the binary typology Sezer et al. (2018) suggested.

Lexical Comparison Between Categories

Tables 4 and 5 present the top 10 most frequent words in complaint-based and humility-based humble-brags, respectively, revealing distinct lexical signatures for each category.

Table 4: Frequent Words in Complaint-Based Humble-Brag

Word	Frequency
tired	73
m	65
hate	47
not	46
busy	40
like	38
ugh	33
get	26
exhausted	24
people	24

Table 5: Frequent Words in Humility-Based Humble-Brag

Word	Frequency
grateful	52
m	22
life	15
love	13
day	11

lucky	11
thank	11
people	10
not	10
time	9

The linguistic analysis clearly distinguishes between humblebrags that are founded on humility and those that are based on complaints, supporting the typology proposed by Sezer et al. (2018). Complaint-based humblebrags often use negative affect words like "tired," "hate," "ugh," and "exhausted," along with activity indicators like "busy," to frame accomplishments as burdens or inconveniences. The words "thank," "love," "lucky," and "grateful," on the other hand, are used in humblebrags that are founded on humility to suggest that accomplishments are fortunate or undeserving. The frequent usage of "grateful" emphasises its role as the main lexical marker in humility-based variations.

Although both approaches are self-referential, they differ in their emotional tone and pragmatic framing. In posts that emphasise the sense of struggle, negation ("not," "can't") is commonly employed; however, in posts that emphasise humility, it is used to express scepticism or modesty. However, it is more commonly used in posts that focus on complaints, suggesting a covert attempt to emphasise success relative to others. The word "people" also appears in all groups, suggesting a function for public acknowledgement or social comparison. These linguistic patterns support the strategic duality of humble-bragging as a face-saving and self-promotional tactic.

This lexical distinction between the two categories demonstrates how different humble-bragging strategies employ specific word choices to achieve their pragmatic goals, with complaint-based variants leveraging negative affect vocabulary and humility-based variants employing gratitude lexis.

DISCUSSION

This study examined humble-bragging as a form of indirect self-presentation in digital discourse through a lexical-pragmatic analysis of 1,001 social media posts. By combining corpus linguistics, sentiment analysis, and qualitative pragmatic interpretation, the findings demonstrate that humble-bragging operates through strategically constructed linguistic patterns that allow speakers to communicate self-promotion indirectly while maintaining an appearance of modesty, relatability, or emotional vulnerability. The analysis further reveals that humble-bragging is not merely a lexical phenomenon but a socially negotiated communicative practice shaped by implicature, audience inference, and digital visibility culture. Through recurring lexical choices, collocational tendencies, and sentiment patterns, speakers navigate the tension between the desire for recognition and the social expectations discouraging overt boasting in public discourse.

The findings demonstrate that humble-bragging relies heavily on specific lexical and pragmatic resources to construct indirect self-praise. Frequent use of negation markers, self-reference, intensifiers, emotional expressions, and achievement-related vocabulary suggests that humble-bragging functions through the strategic juxtaposition of accomplishment and modest framing. Lexical items such as "tired," "grateful," "lucky," and "cannot believe" simultaneously soften and foreground achievement, enabling speakers to present themselves as successful while avoiding the appearance of excessive self-congratulation. These patterns support the argument that humble-bragging functions as a highly calculated form of impression management rather than spontaneous emotional disclosure.

The collocational analysis further illustrates how discourse markers such as "so" and "just" contribute to the pragmatic complexity of humble-bragging. Intensifiers such as "so tired" and "so grateful" amplify emotional framing while indirectly redirecting attention toward the underlying accomplishment. Similarly, modesty markers such as "just," "only," or "kind of" minimise achievements on the surface while paradoxically emphasising them through implication. Such findings align closely with Searle's (1975) discussion of indirect speech acts in which the intended illocutionary force differs from the literal form of the utterance. In humble-

bragging, complaint, gratitude, disbelief, or humility function as secondary communicative forms through which the primary act of self-promotion is achieved indirectly.

The findings also reinforce Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature, particularly regarding the strategic manipulation of the maxims of Quality and Quantity. Many humble-brags appear to exaggerate emotional burden, false modesty, or disbelief in ways that encourage audiences to infer hidden meanings beneath the surface structure of the utterance. Rather than communicating achievements explicitly, speakers rely on audiences to recognise implied accomplishments through contextual interpretation. In this sense, humble-bragging depends heavily on shared pragmatic competence between speaker and audience. The effectiveness of the discourse strategy therefore lies not in direct statement but in the audience's ability to recognise what remains indirectly communicated.

At the same time, the findings suggest that humble-bragging is characterised by considerable interpretive ambiguity. While some posts clearly foreground complaint or humility, many examples display overlapping pragmatic functions that blur distinctions between categories. Complaint-based and humility-based humble-brags often coexist within the same utterance, producing hybrid forms that resist rigid classification. A speaker may simultaneously express exhaustion, gratitude, disbelief, and self-promotion within a single post, creating layered meanings that operate on multiple pragmatic levels. This finding challenges the binary typology frequently proposed in earlier studies and suggests that humble-bragging may function along a broader continuum of indirect self-presentation rather than through clearly separable categories.

The distinction between complaint-based and humility-based humble-brags nevertheless remains pragmatically significant. Complaint-based forms frequently employ negative affect vocabulary such as "tired," "busy," "hate," and "exhausted" to frame success as burden or inconvenience. These expressions generate dual perlocutionary effects by simultaneously inviting sympathy and signalling accomplishment. The speaker positions achievement as emotionally demanding while indirectly foregrounding desirability, competence, or prestige. Humility-based humble-brags, in contrast, rely more heavily on gratitude markers, disbelief expressions, and external attribution strategies. Lexical items such as "grateful," "lucky," and "blessed" frame success as undeserved or externally granted, thereby allowing speakers to maintain an appearance of modesty while still directing attention toward personal achievement.

These differences also reveal how humble-bragging functions as a face-management strategy within digital communication. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that direct boasting may threaten both the speaker's and audience's face because overt self-praise risks creating impressions of arrogance or social superiority. Humble-bragging mitigates this threat by embedding self-promotion within socially acceptable emotional framing. Speakers appear modest, overwhelmed, grateful, or emotionally vulnerable while still communicating success indirectly. The findings therefore support Leech's (1983) discussion of the Modesty Maxim in which praise of self is minimised on the surface level while simultaneously amplified through implicature. In this way, humble-bragging demonstrates how politeness strategies themselves may become instruments of strategic self-presentation.

The role of audience interpretation is particularly important in understanding why humble-bragging frequently produces mixed social reactions. Previous research by Sezer et al. (2018) suggests that audiences often perceive humble-bragging as less sincere and more manipulative than direct boasting because the indirect strategy itself becomes recognisable. The present findings support this interpretation by demonstrating how complaint-based humble-brags often contain lexical and pragmatic tensions that reveal strategic self-presentation beneath apparent modesty. Audiences may therefore interpret humble-bragging not simply as emotional disclosure but as performative self-branding designed to attract validation while preserving plausible deniability. Such ambiguity contributes to the social instability of humble-bragging, where the same utterance may be interpreted as humorous, relatable, arrogant, or manipulative depending on audience expectations and contextual interpretation.

The findings also highlight the importance of digital environments in shaping contemporary self-presentation strategies. Social media platforms reward visibility, engagement, and personal branding while simultaneously

maintaining cultural expectations surrounding authenticity and modesty. Within such environments, humble-bragging becomes a particularly effective communicative strategy because it allows users to negotiate competing social demands. The absence of face-to-face interaction further intensifies reliance on lexical and structural cues for signalling implied meanings. Since social media discourse is often brief, asynchronous, and highly performative, speakers increasingly depend on implication, ambiguity, and strategic phrasing to construct desirable online identities. Humble-bragging therefore reflects broader transformations in digital communication where self-promotion must be balanced against audience expectations of relatability and sincerity.

The integration of corpus linguistics and pragmatic analysis also contributes methodologically to digital discourse studies. The findings demonstrate that recurring lexical patterns and collocational tendencies can reveal broader pragmatic functions within online communication. At the same time, the study highlights the limitations of relying solely on sentiment analysis or automated lexical categorisation. Humble-bragging frequently involves irony, sarcasm, and layered emotional framing in which surface sentiment does not always correspond directly to pragmatic intention. Complaint-based humble-brags, for example, often contain predominantly negative vocabulary while simultaneously performing positive self-promotion. Consequently, computational sentiment analysis alone may oversimplify the interpretive complexity of digital discourse without accompanying qualitative pragmatic interpretation.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The corpus focused primarily on English-language posts collected from Twitter/X, which limits the generalisability of the findings across cultures, languages, and digital platforms. Norms surrounding modesty, self-promotion, and emotional expression differ considerably across sociocultural contexts, meaning that humble-bragging may operate differently in collectivist and individualist communication cultures. Future research could therefore benefit from comparative cross-cultural analysis involving multilingual corpora and platform-specific discourse practices. Likewise, since the present study focused primarily on textual discourse, multimodal dimensions such as images, emojis, gesture, video performance, and visual self-branding were not examined despite their increasing importance in contemporary social media communication.

Another important limitation concerns audience interpretation. While the study identifies lexical and pragmatic patterns associated with humble-bragging, it does not directly investigate how audiences interpret or evaluate these discourse strategies in real interactional contexts. Audience perceptions of sincerity, manipulation, humour, or authenticity may vary significantly depending on interpersonal familiarity, platform culture, ideological orientation, or communicative context. Future studies incorporating surveys, interviews, experimental discourse analysis, or audience reception methods may therefore provide deeper insight into how humble-bragging is socially interpreted and negotiated.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that humble-bragging functions as a complex lexical-pragmatic strategy through which speakers negotiate visibility, modesty, and self-promotion in digital discourse. By integrating corpus linguistics with pragmatic theory, the study contributes to broader discussions concerning indirect speech acts, politeness, digital self-presentation, and audience-oriented communication in contemporary online environments. The analysis further suggests that humble-bragging should not be understood as a simple or stable category of discourse but rather as an interpretively fluid and socially negotiated communicative practice shaped by ambiguity, implicature, and evolving norms of digital interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined humble-bragging as a form of indirect self-presentation in digital discourse through a lexical-pragmatic analysis of 1,001 social media posts. By integrating corpus linguistics, sentiment analysis, and qualitative pragmatic interpretation, the study demonstrates that humble-bragging operates through strategically constructed linguistic patterns that enable speakers to promote themselves while maintaining an appearance of modesty, gratitude, humour, or emotional vulnerability. The findings reveal that humble-bragging is not merely a casual online behaviour but a complex communicative strategy shaped by implicature, audience inference, and evolving norms of digital self-presentation.

The analysis identified recurring lexical and collocational patterns associated with complaint-based and humility-based humble-brags. Complaint-oriented forms frequently employed negative affect expressions such as “tired,” “busy,” and “exhausted” to frame achievement as burden or inconvenience, whereas humility-based forms relied more heavily on gratitude markers such as “grateful,” “blessed,” and “lucky” to present accomplishments as externally attributed or undeserved. Both forms functioned through indirect self-promotion by strategically violating conversational maxims, particularly those of Quality and Quantity, in ways that encouraged audiences to infer hidden achievements beneath the surface structure of the utterance. These findings support the view that humble-bragging operates as a sophisticated indirect speech act rather than a straightforward expression of emotion or modesty.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that humble-bragging cannot be understood through rigid binary categories alone. Many posts displayed overlapping pragmatic features that blurred distinctions between complaint, humility, irony, and self-promotion. Such hybrid forms highlight the interpretive ambiguity of humble-bragging and suggest that its meaning is socially negotiated rather than fixed. The effectiveness of humble-bragging therefore depends heavily on audience interpretation, contextual understanding, and shared pragmatic competence. What may appear humorous or relatable to one audience may be interpreted as manipulative or insincere by another.

The study also contributes to broader discussions in pragmatics, speech act theory, politeness theory, and digital discourse studies by demonstrating how online users negotiate the competing demands of visibility, authenticity, and modesty in contemporary communication environments. In highly performative digital spaces where self-branding and public recognition are increasingly encouraged, humble-bragging functions as a socially strategic mechanism through which users attempt to balance achievement display with acceptable forms of self-presentation.

Nevertheless, several limitations remain. The study focused primarily on English-language textual posts collected from Twitter/X and did not examine multimodal elements such as images, emojis, or video-based communication that increasingly shape online self-presentation. Furthermore, while the study explored linguistic and pragmatic patterns, it did not directly investigate audience reception or perception. Future research may therefore benefit from cross-cultural analysis, multimodal discourse approaches, and audience-based studies examining how humble-bragging is interpreted across different social and communicative contexts.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of examining indirect self-presentation as a dynamic and evolving feature of digital communication. By revealing the lexical and pragmatic mechanisms underlying humble-bragging, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language, identity, and social performance intersect in contemporary online discourse.

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