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# The Assertive-Directive Paradigm: Strategic Layering of Speech Acts in Social Media Promotional Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of speech acts in Instagram promotional captions produced by three skincare brands: Paula's Choice, Hada Labo, and Kayman. Guided by Searle's (1976) Speech Act Theory, the study examines the speech-act categories employed and how they are strategically combined in social media marketing discourse. The study used a two-stage corpus analysis: a quantitative frequency analysis of 90 captions, followed by qualitative textual and contextual interpretation of the same corpus. The findings revealed four speech-act categories; assertives, directives, expressives, and commissives while declaratives were absent. Across 186 coded speech-act instances, assertives (46.2%) and directives (43.5%) accounted for 89.7% of all instances. Seventy-eight of the 90 captions contained two or more categories. The Assertive–Directive combination was the dominant recurrent pattern, occurring in 58 of those 78 multi-category captions and typically linking product information with a call to action. Brand-level differences were also observed where Paula's Choice recorded the most expressives, Kayman the most commissives, and Hada Labo the fewest supporting categories. These differences are interpreted as sample-specific brand strategies rather than effects of national origin. The study conceptualises the Assertive–Directive Paradigm as a corpus-based analytical model of recurrent information-to-action layering, not as a new speech-act category or evidence of actual consumer response. The findings provide practical insights into how marketers and digital content creators may construct persuasive and engaging social media messages.

**Keywords:** Speech Act Theory; Instagram marketing; Promotional discourse; Persuasion; Digital pragmatics

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## INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has significantly transformed marketing communication, positioning social media platforms as primary channels for brand-consumer interaction. Unlike traditional advertising, which largely relied on one-way communication through established media channels, social media enables brands to engage audiences through more interactive and dynamic communication strategies (Li et al., 2022; Rolando, 2025). As a result, businesses increasingly depend on digital platforms to inform, persuade, and engage consumers while simultaneously cultivating brand identity and customer relationships.

Among contemporary social media platforms, Instagram has emerged as a prominent marketing medium due to its integration of visual and textual communication. The platform allows brands to combine images and videos with captions that communicate product information, brand values, and promotional messages (Handayani & Yulina, 2024). Beyond merely accompanying visual content, captions serve important communicative functions by enabling brands to interact with audiences in a more conversational and personalised manner while maintaining professional marketing objectives (Ayomi et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2025).

The growing importance of language in digital marketing has increased scholarly interest in the application of Speech Act Theory to social media discourse. The theory offers a systematic framework for understanding how promotional messages operate beyond their literal meanings to achieve specific communicative and persuasive goals. Using the Speech Act theory as the framework, this study explores Instagram captions identified in the official Instagram accounts of three skincare brands: Paula's Choice, Hada Labo, and Kayman Beauty. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how brands strategically employ linguistic resources in their promotional discourse.

Hence, the paper aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What speech act categories are identified in official Instagram accounts of skincare brands?

RQ2: How are the speech act categories realised and utilised in the skincare Instagram captions?

## BACKGROUND

The rapid growth of social media marketing has transformed how brands communicate with consumers, creating new communicative environments that differ substantially from traditional advertising channels (Ayomi et al., 2022; Handayani & Yulina, 2024). While conventional advertising primarily relied on one-way communication through established media platforms, social media requires brands to simultaneously inform, persuade, and engage audiences within highly interactive

digital spaces (Handayani & Yulina, 2024; Li et al., 2022). These evolving communication demands place increasing importance on understanding how language functions strategically in digital marketing contexts, particularly on platforms such as Instagram where promotional messages must compete for audience attention within limited textual space.

**Social Media Promotional Discourse**

Social media has transformed promotional communication by providing businesses with fast and accessible channels for disseminating information and engaging with consumers. As noted by Handayani and Yulina (2024), social media platforms enable users to locate content easily through keyword searches while simultaneously offering entertainment through videos, posts, comments, and interactive features.

One significant element is the caption text used on social media platforms. According to Handayani and Yulina (2024), effective captions are designed to establish relationships with audiences and maintain their interest by motivating users to like, comment, share, or engage with promotional messages. The significance of caption writing in digital marketing is also highlighted by Millambo et al. (2025), who identify captions as one of the primary means through which brands communicate their tone, personality, and values. Although captions traditionally served to explain images in newspapers and publications, Abdullah et al. (2023) argue that they now fulfil broader social and communicative functions by providing information and facilitating audience interaction. Therefore, linguistic choices in captions have become central to understanding how promotional messages are constructed and interpreted in social media environments (Handayani & Yulina, 2024).

It is clear that across Instagram and other digital platforms, promotional language is designed not only to provide product information but also to attract attention, encourage engagement, establish brand identity, and influence consumer behaviour (Abdullah et al., 2023; Handayani & Yulina, 2024; Millambo et al., 2025). The visuals place particular importance on caption writing, requiring marketers to communicate effectively within a competitive environment while maintaining audience interest. Consequently, captions evolve into strategic copywriting tools that integrate storytelling, persuasion, and audience engagement, making them a critical component of contemporary digital marketing communication. This reflects the increasingly interactive nature of digital marketing communication, where language serves both informative and persuasive functions.

**Persuasion in Advertising**

Persuasion is a central function of advertising discourse, and Searle's speech act theory has been widely applied to examine how language is used to influence consumer attitudes and behaviours across digital marketing platforms (Marlina & Saifullah, 2022; Putri & Hidayat, 2022). Within pragmatic research, speech-act analysis provides a

useful framework for understanding how promotional messages perform functions beyond merely presenting information across beauty-product endorsements, online cosmetic marketing, and written advertisements (Hajar et al., 2024; Saputri et al., 2021; Septianasari et al., 2021; Shahzad et al., 2024; Sukarini, 2022).

Using Searle's taxonomy, numerous studies have found assertive and directive categories to be prominent in advertising discourse (e.g., Adillah, 2025; Ayomi et al., 2022; Handayani & Yulina, 2024; Saputri et al., 2021). Assertives commonly describe products, present information, and support credibility claims, whereas directives invite audience action or engagement. Studies have also highlighted emotional and relational dimensions of advertising discourse. Adillah (2025) observed that expressive functions, such as appreciation and apology, contributed to friendly brand–audience relations. Similarly, Landicho (2022) found that Filipino Facebook Marketplace advertisements incorporated expressive language and emojis alongside assertive and directive categories to establish personal connections with buyers. These findings indicate that persuasion in advertising can extend beyond information delivery to include rapport and affective engagement.

Beyond traditional speech act categorisation, recent studies have explored additional persuasive strategies used in promotional discourse. Qolbi et al. (2024) demonstrated that beauty influencers employ persuasive linguistic techniques such as using English terms, explaining active ingredients, creating curiosity, and describing product textures in detail to attract consumer interest. Marlina and Saifullah (2022) further showed that implicatures, together with assertive, directive, expressive, and commissive categories, are used to communicate product qualities indirectly and construct trust in beauty advertising. Similarly, Putri and Hidayat (2022) argued that promotional discourse not only persuades consumers but also reinforces cultural ideals and shapes personal identity. These studies suggest that advertising effectiveness is achieved through a combination of pragmatic strategies rather than through isolated speech act categories alone.

An important development in the literature highlights that the speech act categories investigated frequently operate in combination rather than as independent communicative units (Landicho, 2022; Siregar et al., 2024). Siregar et al. (2024) demonstrated that promotional captions often contain overlapping speech act categories. Their analysis of Instagram captions from a non-profit environmental organisation revealed that directive and commissive categories frequently appeared together within the same caption. This combination enabled the organisation to encourage participation while simultaneously expressing responsibility and commitment. The study highlights how multiple speech act categories can function synergistically to achieve persuasive goals.

Synthesis of the literature reveals several consistent patterns. First, the assertive category is the most dominant across advertising and promotional contexts, reflecting

the importance of presenting information and establishing credibility. Second, the directive category plays a significant role in encouraging audience engagement and motivating consumer action. Additionally, persuasive communication increasingly incorporates emotional, relational, and implicit strategies alongside traditional speech act functions. The literature also reveals strategic layering and synergistic combinations of speech-act categories within promotional discourse. Understanding the structural patterns through which they are combined and layered is imperative in promotional communication.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study used a two-stage corpus-analytic design to investigate speech acts in skincare-brand Instagram captions. First, a quantitative frequency analysis identified the distribution of coded speech-act instances and recurrent category combinations across the corpus. Second, qualitative textual and contextual analysis of the same captions examined how those categories functioned within promotional messages. The stages were integrated during interpretation. The frequency patterns guided the selection and analysis of representative caption examples, while the qualitative analysis explained how the recurrent combinations realised informative, persuasive, emotional, and promotional functions. Because both stages analysed the same textual corpus rather than independently collected quantitative and qualitative datasets, the study is described here as quantitative frequency analysis followed by qualitative textual-pragmatic analysis, rather than as a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014; Snelson, 2016).

### Corpus and Sample Selection

The corpus consisted of English-language captions collected from the official Instagram accounts of three skincare brands; Paula's Choice, Hada Labo, and Kayman. The collection period covered posts published from April 25, 2024, to May 2, 2025, spanning approximately 12 months. The brands were selected because all three operate in the Malaysian market, consistently use Instagram for product promotion and customer communication, and provide contrasting brand positions for exploratory comparison. Kayman is a Malaysian brand that emphasises accessibility and natural ingredients (Ibrahim & Mohd Hapis, 2022), Hada Labo is a Japanese skincare brand associated with the concept of "Perfect × Simple" (Angelique & Purwinarti, 2023), and the American brand Paula's Choice is positioned as a science-based skincare authority (Montecchi et al., 2024). Purposive sampling was used because the study required captions that met criteria aligned with its research objectives (Putri & Retnowardhani, 2023). Thirty qualifying posts were selected from each brand's official account, producing a dataset of 90 posts and 90 captions. To be included, a post had to be written in English and promote a cleanser, sunscreen, or moisturiser as defined in the

research context. Posts were excluded if they were not product-promotional or if they focused on giveaways, memes, general brand-engagement content, or brand announcements unrelated to a specific product. These criteria ensured that all analysed items represented product-marketing discourse rather than broader brand communication. The caption was the corpus-level unit, while identifiable communicative segments within a caption were coded as speech-act instances; therefore, one caption could contain more than one speech-act instance and more than one category. The verbal caption was analysed as posted. Visual content was used only to contextualise examples and was not independently coded.

**Analytical Framework and Coding Procedure**

Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1976) provides a framework for understanding how language performs actions rather than merely conveying propositional content. For this study, assertives were operationalised as segments that presented, described, or claimed information about products, ingredients, benefits, or skincare practices; directives as segments that invited, requested, recommended, or instructed an audience to act; expressives as segments that conveyed evaluation, enthusiasm, appreciation, or another affective stance; commissives as segments that committed the brand to a future offer, benefit, or course of action; and declaratives as utterances that would change an institutional state of affairs through their performance. The researchers manually coded the data at the level of identifiable communicative segments. No second coder independently coded a defined subset for formal reliability testing, therefore, no double-coded subset size, intercoder-reliability statistic, or reliability coefficient is reported or claimed. A segment received the category that best represented its primary illocutionary function in context. When distinct segments within a caption performed different functions, the caption received multiple category labels. Genuinely ambiguous cases were discussed by the researchers until agreement was reached, with the final decision based on the segment's dominant communicative purpose in its immediate promotional context. This procedure also served to resolve coding disagreements. The distinction enabled separate analysis of (a) the 186 coded speech-act instances and (b) the category combinations occurring across the 90 captions. The framework therefore identifies the communicative aims encoded in the captions; it does not establish their effects on audience attitudes, engagement, or purchasing behaviour.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The corpus comprised 90 Instagram posts and 90 corresponding captions from Paula's Choice, Hada Labo, and Kayman. Coding identified 186 speech-act instances across those captions. Four speech-act categories were present; assertives, directives, expressives, and commissives, while no declarative instances were identified. The distinction between captions and coded instances is maintained throughout the results below.

**Quantitative Distribution of Different Speech Act Categories**

Assertives were the most frequent category, accounting for 86 of the 186 coded speech-act instances (46.2%). They primarily presented claims or information about product ingredients, benefits, efficacy, and skincare functions. Directives followed with 81 instances (43.5%) and were used to invite actions such as trying a skincare routine, engaging with a post, responding to a question, or considering a purchase. Together, assertives and directives constituted 89.7% of all coded instances. These percentages use the 186 speech-act instances—not the 90 captions—as the denominator and indicate the predominance of information-oriented and action-oriented communicative functions in the corpus.

The remaining categories appeared considerably less frequently. Expressives accounted for 12 of the 186 instances (6.5%) and primarily conveyed enthusiasm, appreciation, or another affective stance. Commissives were the least frequent category present, with 7 instances (3.8%), and were mainly associated with offers, discounts, or other future-oriented brand commitments. No declarative instances were identified in the 90 captions. This absence should be interpreted as a feature of the present corpus rather than as evidence that declaratives are absent from Instagram skincare marketing generally.

The overall distribution of speech act categories is presented below:

*Table 1. Frequency of speech-act categories across Paula's Choice, Hada Labo, and Kayman Instagram captions*

| Speech-act category | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Assertives | 86 |
| Directives | 81 |
| Expressives | 12 |
| Commissives | 7 |
| Declaratives | 0 |

A cross-brand comparison further demonstrates the dominance of assertives and directives across all three brands. Paula's Choice recorded 28 assertives and 27 directives, Hada Labo recorded 28 assertives and 25 directives, while Kayman recorded the highest frequencies with 30 assertives and 29 directives. Although the three brands relied similarly on the dominant categories, they differed in their use of supporting categories. Paula's Choice employed the highest number of expressives (8 instances),

reflecting greater emotional engagement. Kayman used the highest number of commissives (5 instances), indicating a stronger emphasis on promotional messaging and special offers. Hada Labo adopted the most minimalist approach, using only one expressive and no commissives.

Across the three sampled brands, assertives and directives therefore accounted for nearly 90% of the coded speech-act instances. Expressives and commissives performed supplementary affective and commitment-oriented functions, while declaratives were not identified. The distribution indicates that this corpus prioritised product-related information and calls to action; it does not demonstrate that the captions changed audience behaviour.

**Structural Analysis: The Assertive–Directive Pattern**

The caption-level analysis showed that 78 of the 90 captions (86.7%) contained two or more speech-act categories, whereas 12 captions (13.3%) contained a single category. Thus, the denominator for the combination analysis is the 78 multi-category captions, while the denominator for the overall caption-level prevalence is all 90 captions. The frequent co-occurrence of categories shows that the sampled captions often integrated several communicative aims, such as presenting information, issuing a call to action, expressing an affective stance, or making a promotional commitment.

Seven combination patterns were identified among the 78 multi-category captions. Assertive + Directive was the most frequent, occurring in 58 captions (74.4% of the multi-category captions). The other patterns were Assertive + Directive + Expressive (9; 11.5%), Assertive + Directive + Commissive (6; 7.7%), Assertive + Directive + Commissive + Expressive (2; 2.6%), Assertive + Expressive (1; 1.3%), Assertive + Commissive + Expressive (1; 1.3%), and Assertive + Commissive (1; 1.3%). The frequencies sum to 78 and the percentages use 78 as their denominator. Every identified combination included an assertive, showing that an informational or claim-making component accompanied the other functions in the multi-category captions.

*Table 2. Speech-act combination patterns in multi-category captions*

| Combination | Frequency | Percentage of multi-category captions (n = 78) |
|---|---|---|
| Assertive + Directive | 58 | 74.4% |
| Assertive + Directive + Expressive | 9 | 11.5% |
| Assertive + Directive + Commissive | 6 | 7.7% |
| Assertive + Directive + Commissive + Expressive | 2 | 2.6% |
| Assertive + Expressive | 1 | 1.3% |
| Assertive + Commissive + Expressive | 1 | 1.3% |
| Assertive + Commissive | 1 | 1.3% |
| Total | 78 | 100.0% |

The predominance of the ***Assertive + Directive*** pattern shows that the sampled brands frequently combined product-related claims with calls to action. In many captions, an assertive established a reason or informational basis for a subsequent directive; in others, as the examples below show, the order was reversed. The pattern is therefore defined by functional layering rather than by a fixed linear sequence. Its frequency supports describing it as the principal recurrent structure in this corpus, but it does not establish that audiences complied with the directive or made a purchase.

Textual evidence from the corpus illustrates how this structure operates in practice. In a Paula's Choice sunscreen caption, the assertive component provides information about the importance of sunscreen application: "Sometimes we all need a friendly reminder to apply (or reapply!) our SPF!" This is followed by the directive "Tag a friend in the comments," which encourages audience interaction and engagement. The caption first educates the audience before prompting a specific action, demonstrating the characteristic information-to-action sequence of the ***Assertive + Directive*** pattern as shown below. Certain elements of the original screenshots presented in this section have been modified to address copyright considerations.

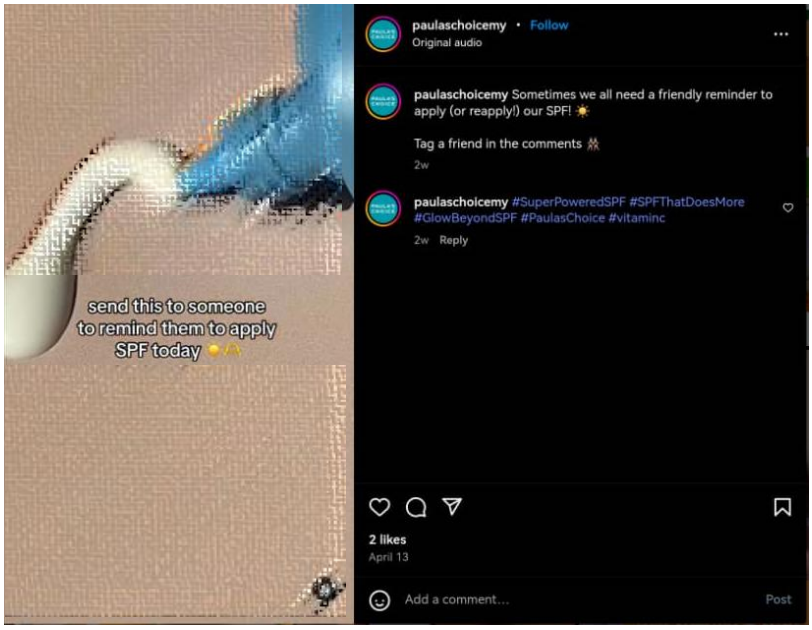



Figure 1: Paula's Choice Instagram Post

Similarly, a Hada Labo cleanser caption demonstrates that the sequence can also be reversed. The directive "Glow up your skincare routine with Hakken's NEW Hydra & Whitening Face Wash" appears first to capture attention, while the assertive "Perfectly hydrates, cleanses, and leaves your skin glowing all day long!" follows by providing factual information about the product's benefits. Although the order differs, the caption still combines information and persuasion within the same structure, reflecting Hada Labo's information-focused communication style as shown below.

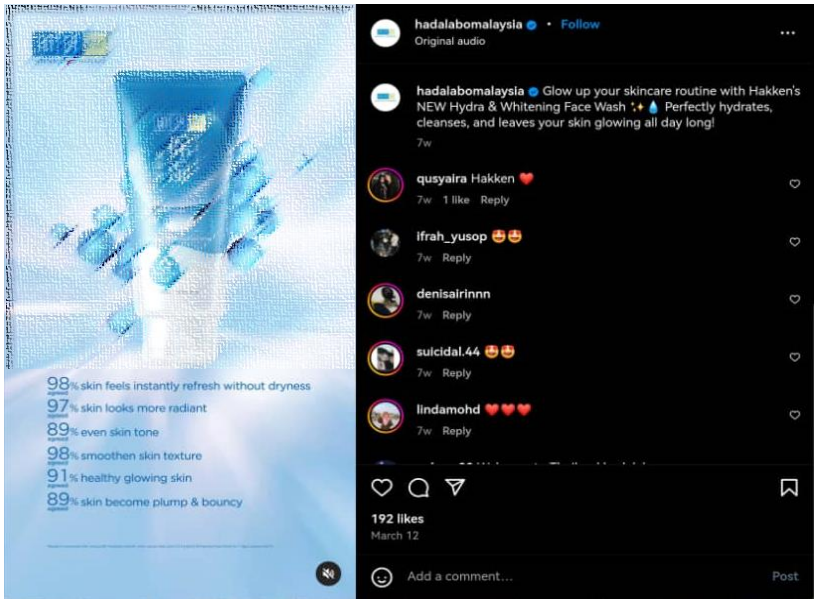



Figure 2: Hada Labo Instagram Post

A similar pattern is evident in Kayman's cleanser caption: "Raya glam from day to night?" functions as an indirect directive that encourages audiences to reflect on

maintaining their appearance during festive celebrations. This is followed by the assertive statement "Well, no more worries when you have Skintella Cleansing Sherbet!" which presents the product as a solution to the problem. The combination demonstrates how Kayman integrates audience engagement with product information while maintaining a conversational tone as shown below.




Figure 3: Kayman Instagram Post

The examples illustrate how the sampled captions layered speech-act functions to pursue multiple communicative aims. The recurring Assertive + Directive pattern paired product-related claims with prompts for audience action, although the order of those functions varied. The analysis therefore supports claims about persuasive and action-oriented textual design, not about achieved engagement, purchasing decisions, or other consumer effects, which were not measured in this study.

## DISCUSSION

### Conceptualising the "Assertive–Directive Paradigm"

Previous studies have shown that speech-act categories may co-occur in promotional discourse (Landicho, 2022; Siregar et al., 2024). The contribution of the present analysis is therefore not the claim that assertives and directives can appear together. Rather, it identifies their high-frequency pairing as a recurrent corpus-level architecture: the combination occurred in 58 of the 78 multi-category captions (74.4%), appeared across all three sampled brands, and linked a claim-making function with an action-oriented function even when their linear order varied. The term "Assertive–Directive Paradigm" is used in this limited analytical sense to name an information-to-action model that

organises the relation between the two functions. It is not proposed as an additional category within Searle's taxonomy or as a universal structure of digital advertising. The assertive element supplies a proposition, reason, or product claim, while the directive element frames an intended audience response. This functional layering helps explain how a short promotional caption can combine informative and persuasive work in one communicative event. Claims about whether readers accepted the information, engaged with the post, or purchased a product remain beyond the evidence provided by the textual corpus.

**Communicative Compression as a Proposed Explanation**

The high proportion of multi-category captions is consistent with communicative compression: brands often placed informational, action-oriented, affective, or commitment-oriented functions within one caption rather than distributing them across separate messages. This interpretation helps explain why relatively simple combinations were common. It remains a proposed explanation, however, because the study did not compare Instagram captions with longer genres, measure caption length as a predictor, or examine audience attention. The data demonstrate co-occurrence within the corpus but do not establish that platform constraints caused the pattern.

Only two of the 78 multi-category captions contained all four identified categories, whereas 58 used the two-part Assertive + Directive pattern. This distribution indicates that layering did not usually entail maximal category complexity. In relation to earlier reports of overlapping speech-act functions in online promotion (Landicho, 2022; Siregar et al., 2024), the present findings add a quantified account of which combinations were recurrent and which were rare. Whether simpler combinations improve clarity or effectiveness requires testing with audience-response or experimental data.

**Brand-Specific Variation in Pragmatic Choice**

Although all three brands relied heavily on assertives and directives, their supporting categories differed. Paula's Choice recorded the most expressives (8 instances), Kayman recorded the most commissives (5 instances), and Hada Labo used only one expressive and no commissives. Kayman also used a local reference to Raya in one analysed example. These observations indicate brand-specific variation in the present sample: Paula's Choice used affective language more frequently, Kayman used more offer- or commitment-oriented language, and Hada Labo adopted the most restricted category repertoire. The data do not permit these differences to be attributed to culture or national origin alone. Brand positioning, target audience, product type, campaign objectives, and individual copywriting practices are plausible alternative explanations that were not independently tested.

Overall, the comparison shows that the three brands combined the same dominant categories with different supporting emphases. This corpus-level variation is consistent

with the possibility that brands adapt pragmatic resources to their positioning and campaign needs, but the small, bounded sample cannot isolate the cause of the differences. Prior research indicates that marketing discourse and strategy can reflect socio-cultural traditions and traditional values (Alalya et al., 2024; Sabur et al., 2025). However, broader claims about Malaysian, Japanese, American, local, or international communication practices would require a larger design with multiple brands from each context and controls for campaign and audience variables.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings are limited by the small corpus of 90 captions, the inclusion of only three brands, the focus on a single social-media platform, and reliance on publicly available promotional texts. The study analysed textual design rather than audience responses and did not test whether the identified functions affected engagement or purchasing behaviour. The brand comparison is exploratory and cannot support generalisations about cultural or national differences. Future studies could use larger, systematically sampled corpora, include multiple brands within each market, examine multimodal features, report independent coding and intercoder reliability, and connect textual patterns with audience-response evidence.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how speech-act categories were distributed and combined in 90 Instagram captions from Paula's Choice, Hada Labo, and Kayman. Four of Searle's (1976) categories—assertives, directives, expressives, and commissives—were identified, while declaratives were not found in this corpus. At caption level, 78 captions contained multiple categories, with Assertive + Directive accounting for 58 of those combinations.

The theoretical contribution lies in modelling the dominant pairing as a recurrent information-to-action architecture. The Assertive–Directive Paradigm does not add a category to Searle's (1976) taxonomy; it provides a corpus-based description of how two established categories were functionally layered across the sampled captions. This formulation extends earlier observations of speech-act co-occurrence by specifying the frequency, cross-brand recurrence, and variable sequencing of the pairing in this dataset.

The practical implication is more limited: the analysis shows how promotional copy can combine a product claim with an explicit or implicit call to action while also incorporating affective or commitment-oriented functions. This description may help practitioners make the intended function of a caption more coherent. The present study did not measure engagement, trust, purchase intention, or sales and therefore cannot establish that one combination is more effective than another.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the sampled captions commonly integrated multiple pragmatic functions and that the Assertive–Directive pairing was their most recurrent structure. The analysis supports a cautious, corpus-specific account of brand variation rather than a general claim about national or cultural difference. Future research should test the proposed analytical model across larger and more diverse corpora, compare platforms and industries, incorporate multimodal features, document intercoder reliability, and examine audience-response data before drawing conclusions about communicative effects.

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**AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION**

Nurul Izzah Mat Nasir (Resources; Formal analysis; Writing)
Hazleena Baharun (Supervision; Conceptualization; Writing)
Habibah Ismail (Conceptualization, Visualisation; Writing)

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**ETHICS STATEMENT**

The study analysed publicly available promotional captions from organisational Instagram accounts and did not involve direct interaction with individuals or access to private account data.

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