

Speech Acts of Racism in the Comment Column of Rachel Zegler Instagram Account as Snow White

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ABSTRACT

Racism remains prevalent on social media, where discriminatory attitudes are frequently expressed through language. This study aims to identify the speech acts used in racist comments on Rachel Zegler's Instagram account and examine the types of racism they represent. Rachel Zegler's casting as Snow White generated widespread online controversy because some audiences criticized the casting of a Latina actress in a role traditionally portrayed as a white European princess, prompting intense public debate and numerous racist responses on social media. A qualitative descriptive method with purposive sampling was employed to analyze ten racist comments posted in response to this controversy. The data were interpreted using Searle's Speech Act Theory and Braveman's racism framework. The findings identified three categories of speech acts: representative, expressive, and directive, with representative speech acts occurring most frequently. The comments reflected two dominant forms of racism: individual racism, expressed through racial insults and derogatory labeling, and cultural racism, manifested through stereotypes about the representation of Snow White. These findings demonstrate how speech acts function as linguistic strategies for expressing and legitimizing racism in online discourse, contributing to pragmatic and critical discourse studies on digital communication and hate speech.

Keywords: *Speech Acts, Racism, Instagram Comments, Rachel Zegler, Pragmatics*

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of digital communication has transformed social media into a major space for public interaction, enabling individuals to share opinions, construct identities, and participate in global discussions. Social media sites like Instagram have become places where people talk about things in public. When users comment, they often use language that performs actions, like making a claim, giving command, or showing feelings. Sometimes, these comments turn into harmful speech that discriminates against others. The live action version of Disney Snow White, released in 2025 and starring Latina actress Rachel Zegler as the main character, caused a big debate when her casting was announced. However, these platforms have also facilitated the widespread dissemination of hate speech, discrimination, and racism because users can communicate instantly with large audiences, often under conditions of perceived anonymity (Matamoros-Fernández, 2023). Recent studies indicate that racist discourse has become increasingly visible across social networking sites, where linguistic choices are frequently employed to marginalize individuals based on race, ethnicity, or cultural background (Fortuna & Nunes, 2024; Kilvington, 2023). Instagram, as one of the most influential visual social media platforms, has become a prominent site for such interactions because its comment sections enable users to express both support and hostility toward public figures. This phenomenon became particularly evident following the casting of Rachel Zegler as Snow White, which generated extensive online debate and racist reactions. Consequently,

examining racist comments on Instagram provides valuable insights into how language functions to construct, reinforce, and normalize racial discrimination in contemporary digital communication.

This sparked discussions about how accurately the film represents different groups, people's political opinions, and how closely it follows the original story. Zegler's non-European ancestry sparked critics of her role, leading some to doubt her suitability and increase harassment, including face-to-face interactions and death threats that required increased security. Her official Instagram posts promoting the movie contain both direct and indirect speech acts of racism, such as imperatives "fire her now" that enforce exclusionary norms or declaratives assertion "She's not white enough for Snow White" that perform expressive illocutionary acts of prejudice. These exchanges demonstrate how performative hate speech is emboldened by digital anonymity, turning harmless promotion into arenas for cultural conflicts.

According to Austin (1962), speech acts are psychological symptoms that are determined by the speaker's language abilities in dealing with certain situations. Speech act occurs if there is an interaction in the form of utterances that involve two or more participants between the speaker and the interlocutor under certain time, place, and context (Rismayanti, 2021). Searle (1969) classifies illocutionary speech acts into five categories based on their illocutionary point, direction of fit between words and world, sincerity conditions, and predatory rules, providing a systematic taxonomy *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. There are five categories of speech acts: representative, directive, commissive, declarative, expressive.

This study uses speech act theory in categorizing racist comments with reference to the Instagram comment section of the Rachel Zegler profile. By examining the illocutionary acts in these comments, the author provides insight how racism works at the linguistic level to produce racist discourse. Speech act occurs if there is an interaction on the form of utterances that involve two or more participants between the speaker and the interlocutor under certain time, place, and context (Rismayanti, 2021). Speech act theory remains highly relevant in analysing language use in digital and public communication, by examining how speech acts function with specific social and cultures contexts. Therefore, speech act theory provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the pragmatic dimensions of language use in various forms of discourse.

The term racism is often used synonymously with prejudice (biased feelings or affect), stereotyping (biased thoughts and beliefs, flawed generalizations), discrimination (differential treatment or the absence of equal treatment), and bigotry (intolerance or hatred). Different forms of racism have been present since the earliest times of human history. The use of labels can either elevate or lower individuals within a social hierarchy. Various situations can lead to the expression of racism, and one significant area is social media. The effects of racism on social media are significant and have many complicated consequences in modern society.

Racism is the relegation of people of colour to inferior status and treatment based on unfounded beliefs about innate inferiority, as well as unjust treatment and oppression of people of colour, whether intended or not (Braveman et al., 2022). In the sociology of race and ethnicity, the concept of racism has come to encompass a wide array of social phenomena, such as systemic inequality, institutional discrimination, internalized stereotypes, and racial attitudes (Shiao & Woody, 2021). It is important to note that this definition recognizes that racism can happen even when there is no intention to be racist, as structural and systemic racism often functions without individuals being aware of deliberately trying to cause harm. In racism there are several types that can be very harmful and caused negatively other people's life: individual racism, institutional racism, cultural racism.

May (2023) discover that discursive practices and patterns of representation in daily communication perpetuate racism. Racist language can be articulated through subtle linguistic patterns that marginalize and subjugate racialized groups in addition to overt racial slurs, drawing on earlier research. These results offer a helpful paradigm for examining racist speech actions in social media comment section, where racism is often expressed through implicit and indirect language.

Azhari et al. (2025) analyse racial implicatures and indirect speech acts in the film *Get Out* using Grice's Conversational Implicature Theory and Searle's Speech Act Theory. According to the study, racism is frequently expressed through indirect and kind remarks that mask bias. The results showed that indirect speech acts and conversational implicatures serve as linguistic devices for expressing racial bias without using overtly racist words.

Another study conducted by Floranti (2022) has highlighted some related work in this area, but the current research is based on the Chinese ethnic group. This research found that racism toward the Chinese ethnic group in Indonesia social media is predominantly expressed through labelling, false accusations, insult, and incitement to violence. Furthermore, the study revealed that assertive speech acts are frequently used to disseminate misinformation and unfounded accusations, positioning the Chinese ethnic group as a perceived threat in political, economic, and religious context.

Furthermore, another research was made by Nazar et al. (2024) employ Van Dijk's theory of discourse and racism as the main theoretical framework to analyse racist expression in the *Just Mercy* movie. Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Van Dijk's approach views racism as an ideological practice reproduced through language, discourse structures, and social interaction. Nazar et al. (2024) analyse racism through multiple discourse aspects, including nonverbal structures, sound (intonation), syntax, lexicon, local sentence meaning, global discourse meaning, schemata, speech act, and interaction.

Even though earlier studies have looked at racism through the lens of language, there are still several areas that need more research. In May (2023), the focus was on how the ways people talk and represent ideas can sustain racism in daily interactions, highlighting that racism can be shown through both direct and subtle language use. Similarly, Azhari et al. (2025) studied how racial implications and indirect speech acts are used in the film *Get Out*, showing how conversational implications and indirect speech can hide racial prejudice. Meanwhile, Floranti (2022) studied racist speech acts directed at the Chinese ethnic group on Indonesian social media, finding that assertive speech acts were mostly used to spread false information and promote discriminatory ideas. In contrast, Nazar et al. (2024) used Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis framework to study racism in the film *Just Mercy*, with an emphasis on various discourse structures rather than the pragmatic functions of individual speech acts.

Although these studies have made important contributions to understanding racist discourse, none of them specifically looks at how speech acts and different types of racism interact in user-generated comments on Instagram, especially when responding to racial representation in modern popular media. Previous research has mainly examined films, broad conversations, or various social and cultural settings, but there has been relatively little focus on racist remarks targeted at actors that appear on social media platforms. In addition, prior studies typically examined speech acts and racism as separate topics, but this research combines Searle (2005) Speech Act Theory with Braveman et al. (2022) framework on racism to explore both the communication purpose of racist statements and the types of racism they convey.

METHOD

Data collecting for this study originates from paperwork that necessitates a thorough comprehension, qualitative methods are used. This qualitative approach allows us to comprehend how a person perceives, experiences, or react to a problem or circumstances. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), a research method serves as a systemic plan that guides the researcher in collecting, analysing, and interpreting data to answer specific research question. Therefore, this method is suitable for identifying and interpreting racist expression and their communicative functions in online interactions.

Respondents

This study did not involve human participants because the data consisted solely of publicly accessible text comments posted on Rachel Zegler's official Instagram account. Publicly available social media comments provide naturally occurring data that can be systematically analyzed to understand online interactions and discourse (Kozinets, 2020). The comments were selected using purposive sampling because this technique enables researchers to identify information-rich cases that best address the objectives of qualitative research (Patton, 2015). The sampling process followed several criteria. First, only comments posted in response to Instagram posts related to the *Snow-White* casting controversy were considered. Second, the comments had to contain explicit or implicit racist expressions targeting Rachel Zegler's race, ethnicity, or cultural background. Third, the comments were required to represent identifiable speech acts that could be analyzed using Searle's Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969). Fourth, duplicate comments, comments consisting only of emojis or unrelated symbols, promotional content, and comments unrelated to racism or the casting controversy were excluded. From the available data, ten comments that most clearly met these criteria and represented diverse forms of racist expression were selected for detailed qualitative analysis. This purposive sampling strategy ensured that the dataset was information-rich and appropriate for examining how racist language is constructed and communicated in online discourse (Patton, 2015).

Instruments

The main tool used in this study was a record form created by the researcher. The document was used to write down and group Instagram comments based on the goals of the research. To make sure the analysis was done in a clear and organized way, the documentation sheet had details like the actual comment, the type of speech act according to Searle (2005) Speech Act Theory, and the category of racism based on Braveman et al. (2022) racism framework. The researcher also acted as the main tool for understanding and looking closely at the data gathered, which is a typical feature of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Procedures

The data collection process happened in multiple steps. The researcher first looked for Instagram posts made by Rachel Zegler that sparked a lot of conversation from the public about race, ethnicity, or how different cultures are represented. The researcher gathered the comments from these posts by taking screenshots and writing down the relevant comments into a record sheet. Third, the comments were checked and picked using purposive sampling to make sure only those with racist speech acts were added to the dataset. Once the data gathering was done, the comments organized based on the categories of speech acts and racism framework. Finally, the results were used to show how racist comments are made and shared in the Instagram comment section.

Data Analysis

Documentation is the method employed to gather data for this study. The author employs observation techniques in addition to documentation approaches, conducting research and observing comments from @rachelzegler Instagram profiles. Observation is a technique for obtaining information involves measuring the variable under investigation (Ajayi, 2023). When using the observation approach, the investigators sort the data through direct observation without consulting respondent. The data consist of written comment containing explicit or implicit racist expressions, including utterances that target race, ethnicity, physical appearance, or cultural identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study identified 10 racist comments from Rachel Zegler Instagram posts during the promotion of *Snow-White* movie. The data were collected from two specific post date: March 20th 2025 and March 16th 2025. Each comments categorized according to two main criteria, the type of speech act according to Searle (2005) typology: representative, expressive, declarative, directive, commissive and the type of racism according to Braveman et al. (2022) which individual racism, institutional racism, cultural racism. Table 1 presents the classification of all comments according to the identified speech acts and types of racism.

Table 1. Classification of Speech Acts and Types of Racism in 2 Post Rachel Zegler

Data	Comments	Type of Speech Acts	Type of Racism
Data 1	"Choconegra"	Expressive	Individual Racism
Data 2	"Snow LatinaX"	Representative	Individual Racism
Data 3	"This ain't snow white this is black coal"	Representative	Cultural Racism
Data 4	"snowblack"	Expressive	Individual Racism
Data 5	"Nigga"	Expressive	Individual Racism
Data 6	"Snowbrown and 7 pronouns"	Representative	Individual Racism
Data 7	"You are not white"	Representative	Individual Racism
Data 8	"Brown mud and the seven sussy mod"	Representative	Individual Racism
Data 9	"Show brown"	Directive	Cultural Racism
Data 10	"Nievenegra"	Expressive	Cultural Racism

Table 1 indicates that representative speech acts were the most commonly identified category, with expressive speech acts coming next, and directive speech acts being mentioned just once. When it comes to the different types of racism, individual racism was more commonly observed compared to cultural racism. No instances of commissive or declarative speech acts were identified, and none of the comments demonstrated institutional racism.

Discussion

Analysis of Speech Acts and Types of Racism

The following sections presents a detailed analysis of each selected comment based on two analytical approaches: Searle (2005) Speech Act Theory and Braveman et al. (2022) racism framework. Each comment is reviewed to determine its purpose in communication and the kind of racism it reflects. The analysis examines how language is employed to carry out specific speech acts at the same time as it communicates racist intentions directed at Rachel Zegler.

Data 01

Choconegra

The statement "Choconegra" is considered an expressive speech act as it reflects the speaker's negative feelings and mockery towards Rachel Zegler, rather than providing factual information or asking for a specific action. The term serves as a derogatory nickname that highlights the actress's assumed racial background. According to Searle (2005), expressive speech acts are used to show the speaker's emotions or mental state, and in this instance, the statement conveys contempt and disapproval of Rachel Zegler's appearance.

From a racial perspective, the comment is considered individual racism because it directly singles out Rachel Zegler as a person based on her ethnicity and skin color. Instead of discussing her acting skills, the commenter emphasizes her race, which promotes prejudice and negative views toward people from various ethnic groups.

Data 02

Snow LatinaX

The comment "Snow LatinaX" is considered a representative speech act as the commenter claims Rachel Zegler's ethnic identity by changing the original title "*Snow White*" to

"Snow LatinaX." The statement serves as a declaration that conveys the speaker's belief as a fact, rather than expressing feelings or providing directions. By making this language change, the commenter tries to shape the character's identity according to the actress's ethnic background.

The comment is classified as individual racism since it explicitly mentions Rachel Zegler's ethnicity. The term LatinaX is used to identify the actress by her ethnic background rather than by her role or how well she performs professionally. Therefore, the statement focuses on Rachel Zegler specifically by addressing her racial identity, which aligns with the definition of individual racism as outlined by Braveman et al. (2022).

Data 03

This ain't snow white this is black coal

The statement "*This ain't Snow White, this is black coal*" is considered a representative speech act as the commenter makes a claim by comparing Rachel Zegler to "black coal" rather than Snow White. The statement is used to convey the speaker's belief about the actress's appearance. In this comment, the statement is given as a factual claim instead of expressing a feeling or giving an instruction.

The comment is classified as cultural racism because it demonstrates racial bias by linking skin color to cultural standards of beauty and the traditional portrayal of the Snow-White character. The comparison between Snow White and black coal suggests that the actress's appearance does not match the usual way the character is typically portrayed. Therefore, this statement is classified as cultural racism because it uses racialized cultural standards to assess the actress.

Data 04

Snowblack

The statement "Snowblack" is considered an expressive speech act as it reflects the speaker's negative opinion about Rachel Zegler's casting, altering the original title "Snow White" to convey that evaluation. The commenter expresses disapproval using sarcasm instead of stating a fact or making a request, by substituting the word "White" with "Black." Expressive speech acts are used to show the speaker's feelings or mental state about a specific situation. In this statement, changing the title serves as a way to mock the actress.

The comment is classified as individual racism since it directly singles out Rachel Zegler by targeting her based on how she is perceived racially and her skin colour. The modified title is intended to ridicule the actress individually rather than relating to the original character or plot. The statement is categorized as individual racism because it targets Rachel Zegler by ridiculing her based on the racial traits she is perceived to have.

Data 05

Nigga

The utterance "Nigga" is considered an expressive speech act as it reflects the speaker's negative feelings towards Rachel Zegler by employing a racial slur. The statement does not present a claim or instruct someone to take action, but instead conveys a sense of disrespect and offense. According to Searle (2005), expressive speech acts convey the speaker's emotional state or their judgment about someone or something. In this case, the comment shows hostility towards the actress by using offensive language.

The comment is classified as individual racism because it directly targets Rachel Zegler by using a racial slur related to race and ethnicity. Individual racism involves discriminatory attitudes or actions that are targeted at a person based on their race or ethnicity. The use of the slur is meant to belittle and disrespect the actress individually, with race being the main factor in the offensive remark. Therefore, the statement is considered an example of individual racism.

Data 06*Snowbrown and 7 pronouns*

The utterance "Snowbrown and 7 pronouns" is considered a representative speech act since the commenter alters the original movie title to express a distinct identity for the character played by Rachel Zegler. The utterance does not express an emotion or give a command, but instead presents the modified title as a statement that reflects the speaker's belief regarding the actress's racial identity. Representative speech acts are used to express or state propositions that the speaker believes to be true Searle (2005). In this comment, the speaker claims that the actress should be linked to the revised title due to her perceived racial background.

The comment is classified as individual racism because it directly singles out Rachel Zegler by focusing on her perceived skin colour using the term "Snowbrown." The addition of "and 7 pronouns" is intended to mock the actress by using language related to her identity, but the main focus of the comment continues to be Rachel Zegler as a person. Braveman et al. (2022) state that individual racism refers to actions or words that treat someone unfairly based on their race or ethnicity. Therefore, this statement is considered an example of individual racism because it mocks the actress in a personal way based on the race she is perceived to belong to.

Data 07*You are not white*

The utterance "You are not white" is considered a representative speech act since it serves as a claim about Rachel Zegler's racial identity. The commenter treats the statement as an objective fact instead of expressing a personal feeling or trying to persuade someone to take a particular action. In this comment, the speaker claims that Rachel Zegler does not have the racial features that were traditionally connected to the original version of Snow White.

The comment is classified as individual racism since it specifically singles out Rachel Zegler based on her race. Instead of assessing her acting skills or performance, the commenter only highlights her race by pointing out that she is "not white." As noted by Braveman et al. (2022), individual racism refers to prejudiced attitudes or actions that target a person based on their race or ethnic background. Therefore, the statement is categorized as individual racism since it personally targets and evaluates the actress based on her racial background.

Data 08*Brown mud and the seven sussy mod*

The utterance "Brown mud and the seven sussy mod" is considered a representative speech act because it serves as an assertion by changing the original movie title Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. The commenter substitutes Snow White with brown mud, depicting Rachel Zegler's look using a descriptive phrase that conveys the speaker's personal opinion. The statement presents a proposition that the commenter believes to be true, rather than expressing an emotion or telling someone what to do. According to Searle (2005), representative speech acts are used to state, describe, or declare information that the speaker believes to be true. In this comment, the altered title functions as a statement that describes the actress's appearance using a disrespectful comparison.

The comment is classified as individual racism since it specifically targets Rachel Zegler by mentioning her perceived skin colour. The phrase "Brown mud" likens the actress to mud, with the comparison being based on her skin colour. This comparison serves as a personal attack on Rachel Zegler instead of focusing on the film or its plot. Meanwhile, the phrase "the seven sussy mod" is another change to the original title that adds to the mocking tone of the comment, but it does not affect how the statement is classified in terms of racism. Therefore, the statement is categorized as individual racism since the disrespectful comparison is directly targeting Rachel Zegler's racial features.

Data 09*Show brown*

The "Show brown" is considered a directive speech act since it serves as an effort to guide or shape the portrayal of the Snow-White character. Unlike representative speech acts, which make a statement or assertion, this utterance subtly tells or hints that the character should be shown as "brown" instead of "white." Searle (2005) explains that directive speech acts are meant to encourage the listener to take a specific action. Although the comment is short, the use of the imperative verb "show" suggests that the commenter is asking or recommending how the character should be depicted.

The comment is classified as cultural racism because it focuses on the cultural portrayal of the Snow-White character instead of directly targeting Rachel Zegler as a person. The statement changes how the character is seen by focusing on their race, showing a view about how the character should be portrayed. Cultural racism refers to the beliefs, values, and norms that favor one racial group and place others at a disadvantage (Braveman et al., 2022). Therefore, the comment is categorized as cultural racism because it centres on how races are portrayed within a cultural setting rather than directly confronting the actress.

Data 10*Nievenegra*

The statement "Nievenegra" is considered an expressive speech act as it reflects the commenter's negative opinion of Rachel Zegler by modifying the Spanish title of Snow White. The revised title does not state a fact or give a command, but instead serves as a sarcastic and mocking remark about the actress. In this statement, the commenter shows disagreement by changing the original title to an expression that includes a racial slur.

The comment is classified as cultural racism because it uses the well-known cultural reference of Snow White and modifies it to highlight racial aspects. The change redirects attention from the character's original traits to their racial features, showing how the character is seen through a racial lens within a wider cultural setting. Therefore, the statement is categorized as cultural racism since it conveys bias by altering a character that is rooted in cultural norms, instead of directly using a racial slur against the actress.

The findings indicate that the Instagram comments analysed in this study are dominated by representative and expressive speech acts, showing that users mainly state identity-based claims and express emotional judgments rather than make promises, declarations, or commitments. This study also employs a pragmatic approach, specifically illocutionary speech acts, as proposed by Searle (2005). Comments such as "Snow LatinaX," "This ain't snow white this is black coal," "Snowbrown and 7 pronouns," "Brown mud and the seven sussy mod," and "You are not white" function as assertions that attempt to present racial identity as fact, while comments like "Choconegra," "snowblack," "Nigga," and "Nievenegra" convey dislike, contempt, and negative evaluation. This pattern suggests that social media comment sections can serve as spaces where race-related meanings are actively produced through short but ideologically loaded language.

From the racism perspective, the data show that individual racism and cultural racism are the most dominant forms. Individual racism appears in direct insults, derogatory labeling, and exclusionary remarks aimed at the subject's race or appearance, while cultural racism is reflected in comments that reproduce broader social beliefs about whiteness, blackness, and beauty standards. The utterance "Show brown," for example, can be read as a directive that encourages racial visibility, while comments such as "This ain't snow white this is black coal" reveal how cultural assumptions are used to devalue darker skin tones and reinforce racial hierarchies in everyday online discourse.

The absence of commissive, declarative, and institutional racism is also significant. Commissive and declarative acts do not appear because the dataset consists of informal Instagram comments, which are more likely to contain opinions, judgments, and identity claims than promises or formal status changing statements. Likewise, institutional racism is not found because the data come from interpersonal social media interaction rather than from

policies, rules, or organizational practices. Overall, the study shows that racism in digital spaces can be expressed through brief comments that still carry strong social meaning, making online discourse an important site for understanding how racial attitudes is constructed and normalized.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how racist discourse is constructed through speech acts in comments on Rachel Zegler's Instagram account. The findings showed that representative, expressive, and directive speech acts were used to convey racist meanings, with representative acts being the most frequent. Two dominant forms of racism were identified: individual racism and cultural racism. By integrating Searle's Speech Act Theory with Braveman et al.'s racism framework, the study explains both the communicative functions and social meanings of racist comments. These findings contribute to pragmatic studies by demonstrating how language reinforces racism in digital communication. However, the study was limited to ten purposively selected comments from a single Instagram account. Future research should analyze larger datasets across multiple social media platforms and include multimodal forms of communication to provide a broader understanding of online racism.

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