

AUDIENCE REFLECTIONS ON ELLE WOODS' CHARACTER THROUGH LANGUAGE STYLE: A TIKTOK COMMENT ANALYSIS

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Abstrak

Media sosial telah menjadi ruang baru bagi masyarakat untuk mengekspresikan opini dan afeksi terhadap karakter film, salah satunya melalui kolom komentar di TikTok. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis gaya bahasa (berdasarkan teori lima register Martin Joos, 1967) dan ekspresi sikap (berdasarkan Appraisal Theory oleh Martin & White, 2005) dalam sepuluh komentar pengguna TikTok terhadap karakter Elle Woods dalam cuplikan video *Legally Blonde* (2001) "*I don't need back-ups, I'm going to Harvard*". Metode yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mayoritas komentar menggunakan gaya bahasa casual, yang menunjukkan sifat spontan dan akrab dari interaksi di media sosial. Dalam hal sikap, komentar pengguna mengandung ekspresi afeksi, penilaian, dan apresiasi, dengan nuansa positif yang mendominasi. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa karakter Elle Woods diterima secara positif dan dianggap menginspirasi, mencerminkan keterkaitan emosional audiens dengan karakter fiksi melalui bahasa digital.

Kata Kunci: gaya bahasa, komentar TikTok, Appraisal Theory.

Abstract

Social media has become a new space for individuals to express opinions and affection toward film characters, particularly through TikTok comment sections. This study aims to analyze language style (based on Martin Joos' five-register theory, 1967) and attitudinal expressions (based on Appraisal Theory by Martin & White, 2005) in ten TikTok user comments responding to the *Legally Blonde* (2001) video clip where Elle Woods declares, "I don't need back-ups, I'm going to Harvard." This research employs a qualitative descriptive method using documentation techniques. The findings reveal that most comments use casual register, reflecting the spontaneous and intimate nature of social media interaction. In terms of attitude, the comments display expressions of affect, judgment, and appreciation, with predominantly positive tones. These results suggest that Elle Woods is perceived positively and seen as inspiring, highlighting audiences' emotional connection with fictional characters through digital discourse.

Keywords: language style, TikTok comments, Appraisal Theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in shaping identity, expressing meaning, and reflecting social relationships, especially in digital media where users often respond instantly to content (Holmes, 2013). In popular platforms like TikTok, comment sections serve as interactive spaces where audiences reflect on media moments using distinct language styles.

This study investigates how Elle Woods' iconic declaration—"I don't need backups, I'm going to Harvard"—evokes audience responses on TikTok, analyzing both the language styles present in user comments and the attitudes expressed through them. The research aims to reveal not only how language varies in

informal digital discourse but also how audiences engage with empowerment narratives in popular media.

The aim of this study is to (1) identify the language registers used in selected Elle Woods' quotes that trigger responses, and (2) analyze how users express appreciation, judgment, or emotional alignment in comments.

While prior studies have examined language variation in film scripts (e.g., Dewi et al., 2024; Xiaoyu, 2025), they primarily focus on analyzing character dialogue to explore formal, informal, and gender-based discourse patterns. Dewi et al. (2024), for instance, categorized language registers in *Instant Family* based on Joos' theory, highlighting the dominance of formal and intimate styles in relation to family dynamics. Meanwhile, Xiaoyu (2025)

explored gender differences in Legally Blonde, emphasizing contrast in male and female communication styles. However, these studies did not investigate how audiences respond to such language use. This current research addresses that gap by analyzing TikTok users' comments on Legally Blonde using both Joos' (1967) language style theory and the appraisal framework by Martin & White (2005), offering a new perspective on public perception and affective response in digital media contexts.

LANGUAGE STYLE

Language style refers to the variations in speech used by speakers based on social context, audience, and communicative purpose. According to Joos (1967), there are five language registers that indicate varying levels of formality: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate. These registers range from rigid, ceremonial forms—often found in legal or religious discourse—to deeply personal and emotionally expressive language used in close relationships, with each register characterized by distinct linguistic features.

A. Frozen

A language variety that is highly formal. This register are usually found in contexts that are ritualistic or ceremonial in substance, like religious writings, legal papers, or official oaths.

"Court is now in session"

B. Formal

The formal register is used in academic or professional settings and it is characterized by structured, clear, and impersonal language. This register avoids informal language and stresses precision and authority, typically in speeches, lectures, or official reports.

"Yes, your honor"

C. Consultative

The consultative register acts as a bridge between formal and informal communication. It is utilized in contexts that demand a respectful information exchange, like those between doctors and patients or professors and students.

Lawyer: "we'll need to provide evidence that clearly supports your alibi. Do you have any documents or witnesses that can help us?"

Client: "Yes, I was with my friend that night and we had dinner together, and I still have the receipt. I can also ask them to testify if needed."

D. Casual

The casual register represents the most informal level of language, featuring relaxed grammar, slang, and

contractions. It is typically used in everyday conversations among family members, relatives, or peers.

"Hey, what's up? Wanna grab coffee?"

E. Intimate

The intimate register represents the most personal and informal level of language use, designated for close relationships characterized by a high degree of trust, emotional closeness, and familiarity among speakers.

"I miss you so much baby"

APPRAISAL THEORY

Martin and White (2005) developed appraisal theory, which focuses on how language conveys attitudes, feelings, and judgments. It has three primary components: Graduation (intensity or emphasis), Engagement (acknowledging other voices), and Attitude (feelings and judgments). In this study, TikTok users' expressions of admiration or emotional responses to Elle Woods' character are examined using appraisal theory. Their remarks demonstrate how language serves as a tool for audience perception and emotional connection by reflecting both linguistic choices and evaluative meanings.

For instance, when Elle assertively states, "*I don't need backups, I'm going Harvard*" One user wrote, "Elle is my role model. This demonstrates a positive assessment (attitude), as the speaker highlights Elle's willpower and self-reliance. High graduation is also reflected in the comment's straightforward and intimate tone, which emphasizes intense admiration. TikTok comments provide real, user-generated information that reflects emotional engagement, linguistic creativity, and impromptu responses (Tagg et al., 2022).

TIKTOK PLATFORM

TikTok has grown into a prominent online platform where language is utilized for community engagement, cultural commentary, identity expression, and entertainment. These platforms are useful in sociolinguistics for observing how language works in informal, real-time discourse among a variety of users.

This study examines how users adapt linguistically to Elle Woods' iconic lines from Legally Blonde using TikTok as a lens. Through brief, expressive comments, users can assess characters, consider their own values, and offer praise or criticism thanks to the platform's interactive features. Both Joos' language style theory and appraisal theory can be used to examine these responses, illuminating not only Elle's speech's stylistic impact but also the ways in which digital audiences jointly create meaning and identity around media content.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze language styles and audience appraisal in TikTok comments responding to selected scenes from *Legally Blonde* (2001). By analyzing ten user comments from a TikTok video uploaded by the account @.thornado, which has garnered over two million views. The video features Elle Woods' iconic line, *"I don't need backups, I'm going to Harvard."* Ten comments were purposively selected based on their relevance, clarity, and engagement.

Data were collected through documentation of public comments and analyzed using two frameworks: Martin Joos' (1967) register theory to identify language styles, and Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal theory to explore evaluative meanings, focusing on affect, judgment, and appreciation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section explores how language styles used in TikTok comments reflect users' emotional and evaluative responses to Elle Woods' iconic declaration, *"I don't need backups. I'm going to Harvard."* In order to comprehend how linguistic choices—from informal to formal registers—encode admiration, inspiration, and personal identification with the character, ten comments were examined using Martin Joos' register theory and Martin & White's appraisal framework.

1. @g.lou05 : *"Her confidence get me through life"*

The comment's straightforward, straightforward, and emotionally expressive tone demonstrates its use of a casual register (Joos, 1967). It exhibits a relatable and intimate voice that is common in social media interactions, devoid of formal structure and complex grammar. Without using formal markers, the phrase *"gets me through life"* has a very personal resonance that fits with informal, emotionally charged communication.

From the standpoint of appraisal theory, this is an obvious example of Affect since the commenter shows appreciation and gratitude. It demonstrates Elle's high level of emotional engagement by demonstrating how her confidence is not only seen but also experienced as a source of inner strength. The comment gives Elle a high character rating and connects her qualities to empowerment in real life.

2. @dayazparker: *"The real og girl boss"*

This comment is classified as casual. It displays informality, friendship, and insider language typical of

social media discourse by utilizing pop culture terminology (*"girl boss"*) and internet slang (*"OG"* for *"original gangster"*).

The commenter uses Judgment to favorably assess Elle's character by calling her the *"real OG girl boss,"* which suggests strength, leadership, and authenticity. It highlights Elle's iconic status in popular culture and expresses admiration for her ambition and self-assurance. Such remarks reveal a common social understanding among viewers and demonstrate how audiences use culturally loaded language to construct identity and authority (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

3. @mild_goose_chase: *"as a blonde with a 4.0, I've elected to believe that Elle Woods and I are twinning (she says, delusional)"*

This register is casual and characterized by humor, self-deprecation, and a personal tone. The parenthetical aside and the lighthearted term *"twinning"* mimic casual spoken language. There's a mix of Affect (pride, aspiration) and Appreciation (valuing Elle's persona). The self-aware tone (*"she says, delusional"*) adds humor and relatability, while the commenter suggests that Elle's accomplishments strike a deep chord with them.

This demonstrates how media alignment and identity construction are reflected in language. In line with audience participation in fan discourse, the commenter's association with Elle aligns her with the empowerment Elle represent (Gee, 2005).

4. @jjenxxgg : *"My spirit animal and role model actually"*

This falls under the casual register. The phrase is brief, expressive, and emotionally driven, using slang (*"spirit animal"*) common in informal digital communication.

By praising Elle as a *"role model,"* this comment conveys judgment and shows respect for her personality. The phrase *"spirit animal"* expresses affect, demonstrating a strong emotional bond and symbolic identification with Elle's character. The use of metaphors with cultural connotations, such as *"spirit animal,"* illustrates how viewers identify with media characters on a personal and emotional level and create identities through common pop culture allusions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

5. @its0lol._ : *"My feminine, strong, and independent, not like wtv snowwhite live action tries to portray"*

With its conversational tone and use of abbreviations (*"wtv"* for *"whatever"*), this register is casual and aligned with peers. Using judgment, the commenter highlights Elle's positive moral and personal qualities, praising her as

"feminine, strong, and independent." At the same time, Appreciation is implied by contrasting Elle's portrayal with another media example, suggesting Elle is more authentically.

The comment serves as an example of how social media users use language to criticize gender representation. The commenter contributes to a larger conversation about feminism and female agency in media by drawing comparisons between Elle Woods and another female character (Cameron, 2006).

6. @aimbzrnes : *"THE ORIGINAL DIVA"*

This comment is casual register, the all-caps, terse phrasing, and pop-culture slang ("diva") mark an informal, emphatic style typical of online fan talk. The appraisal in this comment reflects Judgement, specifically Positive Capacity and Esteem, as the phrase "the original diva" celebrates Elle's confidence and authenticity. She is positioned as an example of strong, independent femininity as a result. The emotional tone is heightened by the use of all capital letters, suggesting a high graduation that magnifies the expression of admiration.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this comment demonstrates how fans use superlatives within a casual register to elevate a character's social status in popular discourse, reinforcing Elle Woods' role as an enduring cultural icon.

7. @legallycunt : *"Should I make an academic comeback?"*

The comment "Should I make an academic comeback?" shows a potential desire or internal drive to return to academic life, reflecting Appraisal Theory through Affect as Inclination. Inspired by Elle Woods' tenacity, it has a contemplative tone that is both sincere and slightly humorous. The rhetorical question conveys emotional engagement and aspiration by implying that the commenter is moved by Elle's example and may be reevaluating their own academic path.

Sociolinguistically, the phrase takes on a consultative register; it is informal but deliberate, addressing introspection as well as seeking possible external validation. This is similar to how digital audiences connect media to their goals in real life. Elle's audacious declaration, "I'm going to Harvard," strikes a deep chord with viewers, eliciting self-evaluation and identification, especially in educational or professional settings.

8. @zoeygthatsmee : *"It's funny that's people disregarded her because she had a fashion merchandising degree, but that's literally a business degree. She realistically could've gotten into Harvard"*

In line with Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), this comment demonstrates a Judgement as Positive Capacity as the speaker draws attention to Elle Woods' underappreciated intelligence. Additionally, it expresses

Affect as Satisfaction, demonstrating admiration for Elle's authority and annoyance at the way society devalues particular academic disciplines. Because it challenges stereotypes in a semi-formal, reasoning-driven way and encourages a careful reevaluation of academic legitimacy, the tone reflects a consultative register (Joos, 1967).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this illustrates how online audiences undermine professional status and merit, reaffirming that Elle's credentials are in line with industry norms in spite of the discrimination she encounters (Holmes, 2013).

9. @adore_kenza: *"BEAUTY AND BRAINS"*

The statement uses a frozen-like expression—a culturally fixed phrase often used to idealize women, but in this case, it's reclaimed to empower Elle Woods as a multidimensional role model. The speaker praises Elle's intelligence and beauty in this comment, which reflects Judgement as a Positive Esteem. Graduation is Force in all caps increases awe and emotional intensity (Martin & White, 2005).

This short but impactful phrase demonstrates how viewers counter conventional dichotomies between intelligence and appearance by positioning female characters as aspirational through succinct evaluative expressions (Lakoff, 1975).

10. @nyagnys : *"My #1 movie whenever I'm feeling low in motivation to do my schoolwork."*

This comment's language displays a casual register, which is defined by informal and self-referential expression (Joos, 1967). The tone is intimate and emotionally charged, demonstrating how the commenter looks to Elle Woods' story for emotional and inspirational support.

This illustrates Affect (Inclination), showing how the commenter seeks emotional and motivational support from Elle Woods' story. The emotionally charged tone highlights how media engagement supports self-motivation and emotional regulation.

According to sociolinguistic theory, it also highlights the parasocial bond between the audience and the character—Elle turns into a symbolic motivator, and the movie provides emotional support, thereby strengthening the mutually reinforcing relationship between media and individual identity (Gee, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated ten TikTok user comments responding to a viral clip of Elle Woods from Legally Blonde *"I don't need back-ups, I'm going to Harvard"*, focusing on the language styles used and the underlying

appraisals conveyed. According to the analysis, the majority of the comments (7 out of 10) used a casual register (Joos, 1967). Consultative comments (2 comments) and frozen comments (1 comment) came next.

From the perspective of appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005), the findings show a range of affective and judgmental responses: 3 comments expressed affect, 4 conveyed judgment, 1 combined affect and appreciation, 1 showed judgment mixed with appreciation, and 1 reflected a mix of judgment and affect. These variations illustrate how users emotionally engage with Elle Woods not only as a fictional character but as a symbol of empowerment and relatability.

In summary, the study shows how evaluative meaning and language style interact in digital contexts. By actively creating meaning and expressing admiration or inspiration through approachable, personal registers, TikTok users strengthen the influence of social media on the development of modern audience-character relationships.

SUGGESTION

To give a more comprehensive understanding of how language style and evaluative meaning differ based on context, platform dynamics, and audience demographics, future research could examine a larger dataset of TikTok comments across several videos (Tagg, 2015). Furthermore, using multimodal analysis to analyze emojis, hashtags, or video captions may help us better understand how meaning is created in digital communication beyond just text (Zappavigna, 2012).

To investigate whether casual language styles and affective engagement are platform-specific or more generally indicative of online discourse, researchers may also think about contrasting various social media platforms (e.g., TikTok vs. Twitter or YouTube). Adding identity construction (Gee, 2011) or digital discourse analysis (Jones, 2015) to the theoretical framework may provide deeper understanding of how audience perception and character admiration change in participatory culture.

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