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Verbal Abuse in the Documentary Film "Unknown Number: The High School Catfish"

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ABSTRACT

Digital verbal abuse is increasingly recognized as a serious social and psychological problem, yet studies on its linguistic realization and underlying motivations remain largely separate, and cases occurring within parent–child relationships are rarely examined. This study integrates Culpeper's impoliteness framework with a psycholinguistic perspective to analyze verbal abuse in the Netflix documentary "Unknown Number: The High School Catfish", which depicts a real case of anonymous cyberbullying perpetrated by a mother against her daughter. Using qualitative content analysis, the study initially employed criterion-based purposive sampling to identify abusive utterances that met the predetermined criteria, and then included all identified utterances through total enumeration. The study analyzed 18 abusive utterances. Findings reveal that positive impoliteness was the dominant strategy (72.22%), followed by negative impoliteness (22.22%) and bald-on-record impoliteness (5.56%), while sarcasm and withholding politeness were absent. Psycholinguistic interpretation indicates that the abuse was motivated not by spontaneous anger alone, but by unresolved childhood trauma and technology-facilitated coercive control aimed at sustaining the victim's emotional dependence. These findings demonstrate the value of integrating pragmatic and psycholinguistic approaches to explain digital verbal abuse within intimate family relations.

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1. Introduction

The development of communication technology, especially social media and instant messaging applications, facilitates communication without face-to-face interaction (Samsidar, 2025). However, these changes have also moved some conflicts online. People

can become targets of aggressive comments, messages, and posts in this space. Such content can spread quickly and is difficult to control (Pordeus et al., 2022). Therefore, digital violence is increasingly regarded as a social problem and a health problem for teenagers who spend a lot of time on online platforms (Zhu et al., 2021).

Cyberbullying is among the most common forms of online cruelty teens report. Cyberbullying may include insults, teasing, threats, spreading false information, and harassment (Jahng, 2024). One reason for the increase in aggression is a phenomenon known as online disinhibition. This is when people are less responsible for what they do because they can be anonymous (Samsidar, 2025). Research has demonstrated that individuals communicating through the internet are more verbally aggressive and more likely to take insults seriously (Knustad & Johansson, 2021).

Verbal abuse should not be considered simply as a general symptom of digital violence, but as an aggressive act with a linguistic structure, an interactional function, and clear psychological repercussions. Abusive speech in the digital space, in the form of insults, verbal harassment, stereotypes, threats, sarcasm, and provocation, influences shame, fear, stress, trauma, and a decrease in the victim's confidence (Wati et al., 2025).

The study draws on two main theoretical perspectives in examining digital verbal violence. The pragmatic approach, and in particular the theory of impoliteness, is concerned with the ways in which face attacks are conveyed through strategies such as bald-on-record, positive/negative impoliteness, sarcasm, and withholding politeness (Culpeper, 1996). The method has been proven to effectively identify the forms, strategies, and functions of aggressive speech in different digital contexts (Nensilanti et al., 2025). Conversely, the psycholinguistic or cyberpsychology approach focuses on mental processes that underlie the production of aggressive language, such as affective disinhibition, cognitive bias, negative schema, moral disengagement, and self-serving motives (Rahmawati et al., 2025).

These two pathways likely develop independently; pragmatic studies classify language strategies well but rarely explain the perpetrator's psychological motives in depth (Nensilanti et al., 2025). Meanwhile, psychological and cyberbullying research accounts for more factors, such as anonymity, moral disengagement, depression, and parenting patterns, but does not explore in detail how these aggressions are realized through language choices (Wardhani et al., 2025). Thus, the main gap lies not in the lack of research, but in the lack of integration between linguistic analysis of speech forms and psychological explanations of the motives behind them.

Previous studies have highlighted this gap. For example, a prominent use of bald-on-record and negative impoliteness (name-calling, vulgarism, cursing, dismissal, and sarcasm) was identified in Nigeria's online political discussions (Taiwo et al., 2021). In online music discourse for social identity building and positioning, a dominant strategy was sarcasm/mock impoliteness (Temitope, 2026). Similar findings were obtained by Ahumaraeze et al. (2026) in the #EndSARS discourse. Rude speech is employed to provoke, to maintain dominance, to construct group identity, and to express negative emotions. Nensilanti (2025) studied online game communication and found the same. Studies of digital impoliteness have tended to focus mainly on examining linguistic strategies and interactional functions.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, Bertsch et al. (2020) define reactive aggression as an impulsive reaction to social threat, associated with anger, frustration, and low emotion

regulation and inhibition, from a psycholinguistic perspective. Dewi & Kyranides (2022) report that anger and hostility are stronger predictors of verbal aggression than most cognitive regulation strategies, but maladaptive strategies such as blaming others also contribute. Aggression can serve to reinstate a sense of self-importance and meaning when people feel frustrated or lose social recognition (Kruglanski et al., 2023).

The study of digital impoliteness and psycholinguistics is concerned with different aspects: the first, the forms of speech, impolite strategies, and social functions in digital communication (Temitope, 2026); the second, anger, frustration, hostility, loss of significance, and poor emotion regulation as causes of verbal aggression, without describing how these motivations are expressed in the language strategies (Kruglanski et al., 2023). Integrative approaches such as psycho-pragmatics are on the rise, but studies that link the type of impoliteness with psycholinguistic motivation simultaneously, using the same data on digital verbal abuse, are still scarce. In addition, most studies use data from public comments, forums, or online games, while digital verbal abuse in family relationships, especially parent-child interactions mediated by digital anonymity, is still rarely studied.

This gap is increasingly evident in the study of parent-child verbal abuse mediated by digital anonymity. Existing literature is dominated by research on adolescents as peer perpetrators or victims within schools, fandom communities, online gaming, or social media in general (Sobkin & Fedotova, 2021). Research on online aggression involving children and adolescents on the Internet has also been more directed at moral disengagement, bias in age groups, and the severity of cyber-aggression, rather than at the fundamental family relationships that display anonymous verbal aggression in mother-child relationships (Chen & Chen, 2025).

The study addressed these gaps by combining an analysis of impoliteness strategies and psycholinguistic motivation to study digital verbal abuse in the Netflix documentary "Unknown Number: The High School" Catfish (Borgman, 2025). This documentary depicts a real case of prolonged anonymous cyberbullying experienced by Lauryn Licari in Beal City, Michigan. For more than a year, Lauryn was the recipient of abusive, threatening, and humiliating anonymous text messages until investigators learned that her own biological mother, Kendra Licari, was the culprit (Pozirekides, 2025; Borgman, 2025). Most cases of cyberbullying are among peers or strangers, but this case is a unique situation in which digital anonymity was used within a repetitive, intimate, and control-oriented parent-child relationship. This case enables the identification of forms of verbal abuse through the strategy of impoliteness and the interpretation of the perpetrator's motivation from a psycholinguistic perspective in an analytical framework.

Based on this background, this study aims to answer two main questions:

1) What types of *verbal abuse* are realized through *the impoliteness* strategy in the documentary "*Unknown Number: The High School Catfish"*?
2) What psychological motivation motivates perpetrators to commit *verbal abuse* in these digital interactions?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a form of aggression carried out through digital media by utilizing electronic communication technology to intimidate, threaten, humiliate, or hurt others (Wiederhold,

2024). Unlike conventional bullying, cyberbullying has characteristics that allow this behavior to occur without being limited by space and time. Through social media, instant messaging applications, and other digital platforms, perpetrators can continue to intimidate, so that the victim continues to receive attacks even though they are in a supposedly safe environment, such as home (Wiederhold, 2024).

Various studies indicate that there are multiple factors, such as high usage of social media, sharing inappropriate information, personality traits, and anonymity through digital platforms, that influence cyberbullying (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022). Cyberbullying is more difficult to control than face-to-face bullying due to anonymity, the convenience of making new accounts, and the accessibility to victims twenty-four hours a day (Zhu, 2021). Recent literature also points out the significant effect of cyberbullying on the psychology of victims. The victims experience anxiety, depression, diminished life satisfaction, social isolation, and the risk of experiencing the desire to end their lives due to long-term psychological distress (Lortkipanidze, 2025).

Besides the impact on the victim, some studies have shown that the involvement of a person in cyberbullying is affected by individual characteristics and the social environment. Muhammed & Samak (2025) discovered that there is a negative relationship between self-esteem and involvement in cyberbullying. This means that people with low self-esteem have a higher chance of being either perpetrators or victims. Therefore, different studies stress the importance of digital literacy as well as improving emotional resilience, parental involvement, and school support as key measures in the prevention and mitigation of cyberbullying (Zahir et al., 2025).

2.2 Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse is a type of verbal aggression that uses language to harm, degrade, intimidate, or cause psychological pressure on others (Deliati et al., 2023). Unlike physical violence, verbal abuse is expressed through speech, writing, and other communication methods that are intended to harm the victim's self-esteem, identity, or psychological well-being (Imayanti et al., 2025).

Recent psycholinguistic research views verbal abuse not simply as the use of abusive words, but as communicative behavior whose meaning and impact are defined by cognitive processes, emotional states, interaction contexts, and communicative intentions of the speaker (Weinstein & Aldunate, 2021). In other words, the choice of language used by the perpetrator reflects the psychological state as well as a specific purpose in the interaction, such as intimidating, dominating, humiliating, or hurting the victim.

In the context of digital communication, verbal abuse has different characteristics than face-to-face communication. Messages conveyed through digital media can be stored, disseminated, and accessed again for a long time, so the psychological impact tends to be greater (Liston et al., 2026). Therefore, it can be concluded that verbal abuse is a form of linguistic aggression that is not only characterized by the use of offensive language, but also by the communicative goal of attacking the psychological condition of the victim through digital media.

Verbal abuse in digital communication appears in various forms of offensive language, including insults, ridicule, threats, intimidation, repeated harassment, and the dissemination

of embarrassing or degrading texts, photos, or videos (Kopecký et al., 2026). On social media, forms of verbal abuse are developing to become more complex because they are influenced by the characteristics of digital platforms. Verbal abuse, as explained by Rahmawati et al. (2025), is not only expressed by direct insults but also by sexist speech, body shaming, gender stereotypes, and moral policing to control the victim's behavior. These forms are often packaged in language that appears simple but contains a meaning that degrades and attacks individual identity.

The characteristics of digital media further strengthen the spread of verbal abuse. The online environment allows for immediate attack, is hard to control, and is often anonymous, thus creating a climate more conducive to aggression than face-to-face communication (Fitrianawati, 2026). Besides the fact that offenders can easily hide their identity by means of anonymity, anonymity is also associated with a higher occurrence of cyberbullying. Moreover, digital harassment can cross platforms like social media, e-mail, text messages, chatrooms, and blogs to the point that victims can be exposed to repeated and ongoing harassment (Putrianti et al., 2026).

Overall, these findings show that verbal abuse in online communication is not simply the use of abusive words, but rather a series of linguistic attacks that can take the form of direct insults, threats, stereotypes, body shaming, verbal sexual harassment, and the dissemination of content that embarrasses the victim. Anonymity, wide dissemination, and the ease with which messages can be reproduced on social media make verbal abuse more persistent, more escalated, and more psychologically destructive, especially for vulnerable groups like women and adolescents.

2.3 Psychological Impact of Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse has been shown to have severe psychological impacts on the victim. Repeated exposure to degrading, intimidating, or humiliating speech can damage self-esteem and affect mental health and a person's sense of self (Imayanti et al., 2025). Generally, the psychological response of people who are victims of verbal abuse is shame, fear, anxiety, depression, reduced confidence, and long-lasting trauma (Sari et al., 2024). This impact demonstrates that verbal violence not only affects momentary emotional states, but also damages the victim's social function and quality of life.

The results of the present study are in line with the study of Mento et al. (2020), which considers the potential for long-term stress, insecurity, anger, and emotional exhaustion as a consequence of exposure to different forms of violence, including verbal aggression. Studies have revealed that adolescents who experience verbal abuse from parents, teachers, and peers are more vulnerable to adjustment problems, interpersonal conflicts, and mental health disorders (Putri, 2025). Thus, verbal abuse cannot be seen as just the use of abusive language, but as a form of psychological violence that has the potential to have a long-term impact on individual development.

2.4 Impoliteness Strategies

Impoliteness strategies are one of the approaches in pragmatics used to explain how speakers deliberately use language to attack, damage, or threaten the face (self-image) of the speech opponent. In contrast to politeness, which aims to maintain social relationships,

impoliteness is oriented towards actions that cause conflict, humiliation, or discomfort in interactions.

In the context of digital communication, the theory of impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996) becomes increasingly relevant because the interaction takes place without physical presence, so the speaker tends to be freer to express offensive speech. Culpeper (1996) classified impoliteness into five main strategies, namely bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withholding politeness. Bald-on-record impoliteness occurs when the speaker directly attacks the opponent without any effort to reduce the threat to the face. Positive impoliteness aims to damage the opponent's need to be accepted and appreciated, for example through insults, ridicule, or exclusion. On the other hand, negative impoliteness attacks the opponent's need for freedom of action through threats, intimidation, or humiliating actions. Sarcasm or mock politeness is conveyed through expressions that seem polite on the surface, but really have an insulting meaning. Withholding politeness is when the speaker deliberately does not offer the socially expected politeness to create the impression of belittling or ignoring the opponent.

The growth of digital communication has led to the application of the theory of impoliteness to the analysis of different kinds of verbal aggression in social media, online forums, and internet communication. Bald-on-record impoliteness and negative impoliteness are the most dominant strategies in online political forums in Nigeria, as the research of Taiwo et al. (2021) shows. The strategies are realized through name-calling, vulgarism, cursing, dismissal, and sarcasm directed at the identity of the opponents in political debates. Meanwhile, Temitope (2026) demonstrates that sarcasm and mock impoliteness are prevalent strategies in digital music discourse used to construct social identity and demonstrate allegiance to particular groups. As Nensilanti et al. (2025) state, e-game communication uses different strategies of impoliteness to communicate negative emotions, show dominance, and manipulate other players' behavior. The use of impoliteness in digital communication is not only determined by the speaker's communicative goals, but also by the characteristics of the digital environment.

Anonymity enables users to express criticism and insults more directly, as the risk of social sanctions is reduced (Quimbo et al., 2024). Similarly, Jovanović (2024) explains that one utterance in digital communication often contains more than one impoliteness strategy, so that the attack on the victim's face becomes stronger. According to Igiri et al. (2026), power relations, topic sensitivity, and cultural background influence the choice of impoliteness strategies in online interaction.

Based on these various studies, it can be concluded that the theory of impoliteness is still a relevant pragmatic framework to explain the linguistic realization of verbal aggression in digital communication. Most of the previous research focused on the identification of impoliteness strategies and the interactional functions of aggressive speech. Therefore, Culpeper's (1996) theory was used in this study to identify how verbal abuse is realized through various impoliteness strategies in the documentary "Unknown Number: The High School Catfish". Then, the analysis is integrated with a psycholinguistic perspective to explain the motivations for the use of these strategies.

2.5 Psycholinguistic Perspective

2.5.1 Psycholinguistics and Verbal Abuse

Psycholinguistics examines the relationship between language and mental processes, such that verbal aggression is seen as a form of linguistic behavior that reflects the speaker's emotions, motivations, and cognitive mechanisms (Widiyarto, 2025). Thus, verbal aggression is not merely a matter of deviating from politeness, but is also a communicative strategy to attack, discredit, influence, and control the direction of interaction (Culpeper, 2011). The verbal aggression in media discourse and social networks is more intense because of the spontaneity, conciseness, expressiveness, and minimal social control inherent in digital communication (Pratama et al., 2026). Studies in psycholinguistics also show that the use of aggressive vocabulary, including invective vocabulary and memes with destructive connotations, can be a tool for the release of negative emotions and influence on the perception of the audience (Kovalchuk & Litkovych, 2022)

2.5.2 Childhood Trauma and Patterns of Verbal Abuse

The cognitive-emotional template developed in early attachment relationships with caregivers impacts how adults regulate their emotions, form relationships, and interpret the behavior of others (Sulastra et al., 2020). This template is for life and affects relationship building. Parents with insecure attachments may have been neglected or abused as children. Trauma in childhood leads to insecure attachments. The high correlation of attachment patterns of mother and child suggests that attachment can be transmitted from one generation to another (Sirparanta et al., 2025). Experiences of trauma can impact psychological well-being and lead to less adaptive communication and parenting (Rensburg et al., 2024). Other studies have shown it is not necessarily the case that a decrease in reflective functioning is associated with childhood maltreatment. The experience appears to be linked to mentalizing disorders, such as thoughts about disordered, overly analytical, biased, and inconsistent mental states (Ensink et al., 2024). Rather, the experience seems to be more strongly related to certain disorders of mentalizing, in particular reflections on disturbed, over-analytical, biased, and inconsistent mental states (Ensink et al., 2024).

2.5.3 Coercive Control as a Form of Technology-Based Abuse

From a psycholinguistic perspective, coercive control facilitated by technology is conceptualized as a persistent pattern of abusive behavior where the abuser exercises and maintains power, dominance, and control over others. It can also have serious implications for children and family relationships, such as strained parent-child relationships, harsher parenting, child abuse, and children's emotional and social well-being (Xyrakis et al., 2024). Such violence can be carried out via SMS, social media, phone calls, anonymous numbers, or fake accounts to intimidate, degrade, threaten, and control the victim (Nikupeteri et al., 2021). Swearing, insults, threats, and negative labeling in digital messages are not only signs of verbal aggression, but also communicative acts that aim to produce fear and to uphold the dominance of the perpetrator (Weinstein & Aldunate, 2021).

In the mother-child context, coercive control can also impact relationship quality and the ways in which mothers and children communicate about experiences of abuse (Kelly & Luzón, 2026). The behavior of mothers who cyberbully their children can be seen as an effort to cause psychological distress and dependence, and to gain control over the child. The perpetrator's

motives have been related to a need to dominate, hurt, or get attention, or to increase the need for attention of the victim. As it is shown in the documentary "Unknown Number: The High School Catfish" (Borgman, 2025).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design. According to Sugiyono (2019), the qualitative descriptive research method is used to describe the real conditions of a phenomenon without manipulating variables. The emphasis on design quality is carried out through the selection of appropriate data collection techniques (interviews, observations, documentation), clear data analysis systematics, and data validity that is maintained because the purpose of the research is to describe and interpret the realization of aggressive language in its natural context, not to test the statistical relationships between variables.

The analysis method used is qualitative content analysis because this method allows for systematic analysis of the content of the text as well as a deeper interpretation of meaning (Nicmanis, 2024). The pragmatic framework used to identify forms of verbal abuse is the theory of impoliteness by Culpeper (1996), and it consists of five strategies, namely bald on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm/mock politeness, and withholding politeness. The psycholinguistic approach is used at the interpretation stage to explain how aggressive language reflects the perpetrator's emotions, motivations, and cognitive mechanisms. Thus, the design of this study is qualitative descriptive, with qualitative content analysis oriented toward pragmatic psycholinguistics.

3.2 Data and Data Source

The data source for this study is the documentary "Unknown Number: The High School Catfish", directed by Skye Borgman, as audiovisual texts can provide rich verbal and nonverbal context for analyzing impoliteness. Primary data are 18 utterances identified as containing verbal violence, in the form of digital messages shown in the documentary. Units of analysis can be words, phrases, clauses, sentences, or units of messages that contain insults, threats, intimidation, ridicule, or forms of attack on the victim's face. In addition to verbal data, this study also uses contextual information from scenes, narratives, relationships between characters, and communication situations to assist in interpretation of meaning. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and previous studies on cyberbullying, verbal harassment, disrespect, and psycholinguistics to support the interpretation of the findings.

3.3 Sampling Technique

In this study, criterion-based purposive sampling was initially used to identify utterances that met the predetermined research criteria. All utterances meeting these criteria were subsequently included through total enumeration (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The inclusion criteria for this study were: (1) speech contained explicit or implicit verbal abuse; (2) speech was addressed to a specific target; (3) speech appeared clearly in dialogue, text messages, or digital evidence in the documentary; (4) speech had sufficient context to be interpreted; and (5) speech could be classified under Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness framework. Based on these criteria, 18 utterances were obtained as the main data of the study.

3.4 Data Collection Technique

Data collection was carried out using the documentation method because the main source of research is an audiovisual document (Borish et al., 2021). The data collection procedure was carried out through several stages: watching the documentary repeatedly, transcribing speech, marking the unit of meaning, and recording the context of the production and reception of the text (Krippendorff, 2018). The researcher watched the documentary repeatedly to understand the plot, the relationship between the characters, and the situation behind the occurrence of aggressive speech. After that, the researcher transcribed the relevant dialogues, text messages, and narratives into a data sheet. Each utterance was then marked as a meaning unit to be condensed, encoded, and grouped systematically. In this initial stage, the researcher also recorded context elements such as speakers, interlocutors, media, and communicative purposes.

3.5 Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis model that moved from meaning units to condensation, encoding, categorization, and interpretation (Lindgren et al., 2020). This analysis was descriptive as well as interpretive, making it suitable for identifying aggressive forms of speech and interpreting meaning. In the first stage, the researcher decontextualized the data by selecting relevant utterances and then assigning a starting code to each data unit. In the second stage, the codes were grouped into categories based on Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness strategy. In the third stage, the researcher recontextualized the data by linking linguistic categories to the documentary narrative scene and information. The final interpretation is directed to explain the perpetrator's possible psychological motivations carefully, based on linguistic and contextual evidence.

3.6 Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study adopted the criteria proposed by Guba & Lincoln (1989). Credibility was established through repeated viewing of the documentary, careful transcription of the utterances, and continuous comparison between the linguistic data and their contextual meanings. Dependability was achieved through careful documentation of each step of data collection and analysis. Confirmability was ensured by anchoring all interpretations in the documentary evidence and backing them with relevant theoretical frameworks. Transferability was achieved by providing detailed descriptions of the context of the research, data selection procedures, and analytical processes, and allowing the reader to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings of the research on the pragmatic and psycholinguistic analysis of verbal abuse in the Netflix documentary "Unknown Number: The High School Catfish" (Borgman, 2025). The current analysis follows Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness strategies to analyze the linguistic strategies of the perpetrators and employs psycholinguistic perspectives to understand the psychological reasons behind the abusive behavior. These findings are structured according to two research questions: (1) types of verbal abuse based on impoliteness strategies, and (2) psycholinguistic factors that motivate the abusive behavior of perpetrators.

The data consisted of 18 examples of verbal abuse extracted from anonymous text messages presented throughout the documentary. Each utterance was encoded and classified according to Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness strategies before being interpreted in its linguistic and contextual environment. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, all identified utterances were examined during the coding process. Representative quotes are presented in the following sections, while the remaining utterances that exhibit similar linguistic characteristics are discussed collectively to indicate repeated patterns of verbal aggression.

4.1 Types of Verbal Abuse Based on Impoliteness Strategies

Table 1: Frequency of Impoliteness Strategies

No.	Impoliteness Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
1	Bald on-record Impoliteness	1	5, 56%
2	Positive Impoliteness	13	72,22%
3	Negative Impoliteness	4	22,22%
4	Sarcasm	0	0%
5	Withhold Politeness	0	0%
	Total	18	**100%**

This analysis identified three strategies of impoliteness used by the perpetrators, namely positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and bald on record impoliteness. Meanwhile, no use of sarcasm, mock politeness, or withholding politeness strategies was found in the data. As shown in Table 1, positive impoliteness was the most dominant strategy, which was found in 13 out of 18 utterances, or 72.22%. This strategy was followed by negative impoliteness that appeared in 4 utterances or by 22.22%, while direct impoliteness was only found in 1 utterance or by 5.56%.

The dominance of positive disrespect indicates that the perpetrator is more likely to attack the victim's self-image, self-esteem, and social identity. This strategy is reflected in the repeated insults, derogatory labeling, ridicule, and attacks on the victim's physical appearance, personal values, and character. Such language is used to belittle the victim, to make her feel unwanted or unappreciated, to erode his or her confidence. Negative impoliteness is the communication of language that threatens, intimidates, and psychologically oppresses the victim. This approach is detectable in messages with threats of death or expectations of death, threats of violence, monitoring, and sexual insults. These languages erode the victim's sense of security and freedom, but also contribute to instilling fear and maintaining the perpetrator's control. Direct impoliteness, in contrast, is less frequent and is characterized by blunt orders or statements in an unmitigated way without attempting to reduce their offensive potential.

Sarcasm was not found because the messages in the data were conveyed directly through swearing, insults, and threats, rather than through sarcasm or implicit meaning. Withholding politeness was not found because no polite expressions were supposed to be used but were deliberately not conveyed by the perpetrator. To provide greater transparency regarding the coding process, Table 2 presents a complete classification of all 18 profanities analyzed in this study according to Culpeper (1996) indecency framework.

Table 2: Classification of Verbal Abuse Utterances Based on Culpeper (1996) Impoliteness Strategies

Data	Time	Representative Utterance	Impoliteness Strategy
1	05:21–05:30	*"your lonely ugly ass is alone."*	Positive Impoliteness
2	08:58–09:00	*"u are the ugliest I've ever seen."*	Positive Impoliteness
3	10:34–10:42	*"fn **trash bitch** don't fn wear leggings ain't no one want see ur **anorexic flat ass**"*	Positive Impoliteness
4	10:49–11:10	*"ur worthless…"*	Positive Impoliteness
5	11:43	*"bitch fuck off."*	Bald on-record
6	11:44	*"u be ugliest skank."*	Positive Impoliteness
7	12:21–12:23	*"everything, u are useless…"*	Positive Impoliteness
8	13:27–13:32	*"u dressed like an fn slut."*	Positive Impoliteness
9	20:36	*"dumb ugly ass"*	Positive Impoliteness
10	20:37	*"u worthless."*	Positive Impoliteness
11	20:38–20:40	*"kill yourself now bitch."*	Negative Impoliteness
12	20:43–20:46	*"his life would be better if you were dead."*	Negative Impoliteness
13	27:04–27:08	*"finish yourself or we will."*	Negative Impoliteness
14	30:25–30:29	*"we will make everyday miserable for u."*	Negative Impoliteness
15	39:38–39:42	*"a bitch fucked up his life."*	Positive Impoliteness
16	40:17–40:26	*"she is a fucking waste."*	Positive Impoliteness
17	40:30–40:35	*"she don't deserve the air she breathes…"*	Positive Impoliteness
18	41:30–41:37	*"no one ever wants ur anorexic…"*	Positive Impoliteness

Table 2 presents a complete classification of all 18 abusive utterances identified in the documentary. Each speech is encoded according to Culpeper's (1996) indecency framework. Although representative quotations are discussed in detail in the following subsections, the classification indicates that all identified remarks were included in the coding process.

4.1.1 Positive Impoliteness

Positive impoliteness was identified as the most dominant strategy, with 13 of the 18 abusive comments analyzed in the documentary. Positive impoliteness is defined by Culpeper (2011) as an attempt to damage the hearer's positive face by rejecting, humiliating, insulting, or belittling their need for social approval and acceptance. In the present study, positive impoliteness appeared in the form of insulting names, attacks on physical appearance, negative judgments of personal values, and expressions intended to mock or humiliate the victim. The data classified under this strategy were Data 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, and 18. It comprised 13 of the 18 utterances analyzed.

One representative example appears in Data 2:

Unknown Number: *"u are the ugliest I've ever seen."*

This utterance was classified as positive impoliteness because it uses a direct negative evaluation and an insulting label to attack the victim's positive face (Culpeper, 2011). The superlative adjective **ugliest** intensifies the insult by presenting the victim as extremely unattractive. Rather than criticizing a specific action or behavior, the speaker attacks the victim's physical appearance, self-image, and social value. This utterance therefore functions not only as an expression of hostility but also as a linguistic strategy for humiliating and degrading the victim (Culpeper, 1996).

The dominance of positive impoliteness indicates that the perpetrator primarily used language to damage the victim's self-esteem and social identity. The insults about the victim's looks, identity, and personal worth were repeated, indicating a pattern of verbal aggression to undermine the victim's need for acceptance, respect, and belonging (Culpeper, 1996).

4.1.2 Negative Impoliteness

Negative impoliteness was identified in 4 of the 18 abusive utterances, representing 22.22% of the analysed data. According to Culpeper's (1996) framework, negative impoliteness involves language that restricts the hearer's freedom, invades personal space, creates fear, or imposes pressure on the hearer (Culpeper, 1996). In this study, the strategy appeared through direct threats, intimidation, coercive commands, sexually degrading expressions, and repeated messages expressing a desire for the victim's death. The utterances classified as negative impoliteness were Data 11, 12, 13, and 14. These utterances primarily functioned to intimidate the victim, threaten her emotional security, and establish psychological dominance (Culpeper, 2011).

One representative example appears in Data 11:

Unknown Number: *"kill yourself now bitch."*

This utterance was classified as negative impoliteness because the imperative expression **kill yourself** now imposes an extreme and coercive action on the victim. The command restricts the victim's autonomy and places intense psychological pressure on her (Culpeper, 1996). The word **bitch** further intensifies the aggression by functioning as a derogatory label. Although this expression may also reflect positive impoliteness through name-calling, the dominant function of the utterance is negative impoliteness because the command is intended to pressure and intimidate the victim (Culpeper, 1996).

The utterance does not merely express hostility but constructs a coercive interaction in which the victim is positioned as someone who must obey the sender's harmful command. The compulsion verb paired with the degrading label increases the emotional impact of the message, threatening the victim's sense of safety and autonomy (Weinstein & Aldunate, 2021).

The presence of negative impoliteness in 4 out of 18 utterances suggests that the perpetrator used a smaller, but more intense, set of messages to exert psychological pressure and intimidation. References to death, threats, coercive commands, and sexual degradation suggest an attempt to intimidate the victim and to undermine her emotional security (Culpeper, 1996).

4.1.3 Bald on-record Impoliteness

Bald-on-record impoliteness was the least frequently used strategy, appearing in only 1 of the 18 abusive utterances, or 5.56% of the total data. According to Culpeper, this strategy involves a direct and unmitigated face-threatening act expressed without any attempt to soften its offensive force (Culpeper, 1996). In this study, the strategy was identified in Data 5, which conveyed rejection and hostility through a direct and uncompromising expression.

One representative example is found in Data 5:

Unknown Number: *"bitch fuck off."*

This utterance is classified as bald-on-record impoliteness because the expression **fuck off** is a direct imperative command telling the victim to leave. The command is delivered with no politeness markers, mitigation, or indirectness, making the intention to offend explicit (Culpeper, 1996). The term bitch is also used as an offensive label, which can indicate positive impoliteness. However, the dominant strategy in this utterance is bald-on-record impoliteness because the main aim of this utterance is to refuse the victim with a direct and unmitigated command (Culpeper, 1996).

The utterance communicates hostility and rejection in a brief but forceful manner. The direct imperative places pressure on the victim and openly attacks her interpersonal dignity without attempting to maintain a respectful relationship (Culpeper, 1996). The limited occurrence of bald-on-record impoliteness indicates that the perpetrator used isolated direct attacks less frequently than other forms of verbal abuse, such as repeated humiliation, insults, and intimidation. Nevertheless, the presence of this direct expression contributed to the cumulative psychological impact of the abuse by reinforcing the victim's experience of rejection, hostility, and verbal aggression (Culpeper, 1996).

4.2 Psycholinguistic Motivations Underlying Verbal Abuse

The second research question attempts to explain the psychological motivations behind the perpetrator's abusive language. The first research question was about the linguistic manifestation of verbal abuse in the form of disrespectful strategies. This section is about the psychological processes that motivate the perpetrators to produce abusive messages repeatedly. This analysis is based on the evidence presented throughout the documentary, including interviews with Kendra Licari, statements from family members and investigators, documentary narration, and expert opinion. These findings are interpreted using a psycholinguistic perspective on projection, unresolved trauma, attachment, and coercive control as a form of technology-based abuse.

4.2.1 Childhood Trauma and Patterns of Verbal Abuse

The documentary presents Kendra's previous traumatic experience and her statement that she became afraid when her daughter entered adolescence (Borgman, 2025). From a psycholinguistic perspective, the repeated use of first-person expressions such as "*I was scared*" represents the speaker's emotional positioning and presents the daughter's transition into adolescence as a threatening situation (Xyrakis et al., 2024).

The verbs **protect** and **keep her safe** frame the perpetrator's behaviour as an act of protection, even though the actual behaviour involved anonymous messages, intimidation, and psychological pressure (Borgman, 2025). This contrast suggests that the language of protection may have functioned as a cognitive justification for controlling the daughter's independence (Fissel et al., 2025). The finding is consistent with research suggesting that childhood maltreatment may be associated with difficulties in reflective functioning and with distorted or inconsistent interpretations of mental states (Ensink et al., 2024).

However, the documentary does not provide sufficient clinical evidence to establish that Kendra's trauma directly caused her abusive behaviour (Rensburg et al., 2024). The trauma

should therefore be interpreted as a possible background factor that may have influenced her perception of danger and her need to control the daughter's development (Rensburg et al., 2024).

4.2.2 Coercive Control as a Form of Technology-Based Abuse

The analysis identified the use of anonymous digital messages as a central feature of abusive behavior (Borgman, 2025). The messages contained insults, threats, sexual insults, death references, and commands that caused fear and psychological distress for the victim (Borgman, 2025). The documentary also presents the possibility that the perpetrator used the messages to keep her daughter emotionally close and make her seek help from her. The director's interpretation that the messages constrain the victim to stay psychologically connected to her mother also shows the desire to stay close. This interpretation fits the notion of technology-enabled coercive control, where digital communication is used to instill fear, threaten autonomy, and control others (Nikupeteri et al., 2021).

Another analysis also found a pattern of self-justification when Kendra compared her actions to other illegal behaviors that people may engage in without getting caught (Borgman, 2025). The statement indicates that the perpetrator is attempting to minimize or justify the seriousness of their actions (Borgman, 2025). In the documentary, the researchers see a pattern of anonymous cyberbullying, bullying, and emotional violence that can be described as coercive control. This concept relates to a repetitive pattern of behavior used to exercise power and control through intimidation, manipulation, and emotional violence (Xyrakis et al., 2024). In this sense, psychological distress and emotional dependence can be a mechanism to keep the victim under control (Borgman, 2025).

Overall, the data showed that the perpetrator's cyberbullying was driven by a combination of self-justification, fear of the daughter's maturity, excessive involvement, and a desire to maintain emotional closeness and control. Linguistic evidence suggests that the perpetrator frames his or her behavior through protective language, while communication actually creates fear, humiliation, and psychological distress for the victim (Zhong, 2022).

A dissonance between the stated motives and the damaging communicative effects of the behavior is evident in the contradiction between the expressed desire to "protect" the princess and the use of messages that propel her to die (Waxman, 2025). From a psycholinguistic perspective, this contradiction indicates that protective language serves as a type of behavioral rationalization that, over time, undermines the victim's autonomy and enhances her reliance on the perpetrator (Fissel, 2025). The dominant motivation shown in this case is not only anger, but an attempt to control the victim through instilling fear and emotional dependence.

5. Discussion

In this section, the researcher will go over the findings from 4.1 and 4.2 in a more critical and interpretive way. The researcher will relate them to Culpeper's (1996) theory of impoliteness and to psycholinguistic perspectives, compare them to earlier research, and explain their meaning, causes, and implications. The discussion's main concern is to answer the questions about why positive impoliteness dominates the verbal abuse in the "Unknown Number: The High School Catfish" (Borgman, 2025), and why it is driven by a nexus of past trauma and

technology-based coercive control rather than spontaneous anger, which has been the assumption in prior cyberbullying studies.

The prevalence of positive impoliteness (72.22%) confirms the statement of Culpeper (1996) that face attacks are not necessarily an overt threat, but more often a rejection of the addressee's need for social acceptance. The perpetrator always attacks the victim's identity and self-esteem, not his freedom of action alone. The occurrence of negative impoliteness (22.22%) and bald-on-record impoliteness (5.56%) shows a combination of strategies based on the intensity of the pressure to be created, in line with Jovanović (2024) that a digital speech can contain more than one strategy at a time. The choice of strategy associated with finding 4.2 is not only a language style, but it also reflects the psychological process of the perpetrator, confirming the view of Khafaga (2023) and Weinstein & Aldunate (2021) that impoliteness is also motivated by the psychological characteristics of the speaker.

This is not the case for Taiwo (2021), who found bald-on-record and negative impoliteness to be prevalent in online political forums. Identity attacks were less frequent in this paper, suggesting that private and intimate relationships (mother-child) are more likely to produce identity-oriented positive impoliteness than the overt rejection that is more typical in public-competitive situations. The absence of sarcasm is also different from Temitope (2026), which shows dominant sarcasm to establish group identity. In this data, the message is sent directly and personally, not for collective solidarity, as in Ahumaraeze (2026) and Nensilanti (2025). From a psycholinguistic perspective, these results are consistent with Bertsch (2020) on aggression as a response to social threats, but they also extend Kruglanski (2023): abusive messages here are a way of maintaining emotional proximity, not just venting anger, thus providing new empirical evidence for pragmatic and psycholinguistic integration that have been developing separately (Wardhani, 2025).

The prevalent form of impoliteness is positive impoliteness. This means that the perpetrator's main aim is not only to frighten, but to continuously undermine the identity and self-confidence of the victim. The presence of negative impoliteness adds a threat to the sense of security, which makes the verbal abuse escalatory. The absence of sarcasm and withholding politeness means that the perpetrator does not try to disguise his abusive intentions, consistent with low social accountability in anonymous conditions (Samsidar, 2025). At least three factors explain why this pattern appears. First, online anonymity reduces behavioral barriers (online disinhibition), allowing attacks without regard for relational consequences (Supriani et al., 2026). Second, the cognitive schemata grounded in past trauma and Kendra's fear of her child's adolescence render the child's independence a threat, so that the derogating language is internally framed as a protective measure (Rensburg et al., 2024). Third, the technology-based coercive control motive (Xyrakis et al., 2024) explains the convergence of these two strategies, in which identity attacks undermine the victim's confidence in the outside world, and the threat maintains his or her emotional dependence, a pattern leading to isolation and dependence, rather than just reactive aggression (Bertsch et al., 2020).

Theoretically, these findings confirm that the framework of impoliteness and psycholinguistics complement each other in explaining verbal digital abuse. In practical terms, the combination of personal insults and threats sent anonymously and repeatedly can be an indicator for schools, counselors, and law enforcement to recognize coercive control

from an early age, including when the perpetrator comes from a family circle. These findings are relevant to the current state of digital violence, when the boundaries of family private space and public digital space are increasingly blurred, and parents' digital literacy is still uneven, conditions that allow anonymity to be used for control in close relationships, while reminding us that intentions claimed as protection need to be judged by their communicative impact, not by the perpetrator's statement alone.

This research contributes through three things: the simultaneous integration of impoliteness analysis and psycholinguistic motives in a single data corpus, the elevation of a rarely studied context, namely anonymous verbal abuse in parent-child relationships, different from the majority of studies on peer relations or public forums, and the use of real-event documentaries that allow triangulation between abusive speech and the psychosocial context of the perpetrator. Overall, the dominance of positive impoliteness accompanied by negative impoliteness represents the perpetrator's attempt to attack identity while maintaining emotional control over the victim, rooted in past trauma and manifested through technology-based coercive control.

6. Conclusion

In the documentary "Unknown Number: The High School Catfish", verbal violence was mostly represented by positive indecency (72.22%), followed by negative incivility (22.22%) and bald impoliteness (5.56%). The study did not find sarcasm strategies and withhold politeness. This pattern shows that the offender systematically attacks the victim's identity, self-esteem, and social image through insults and power labeling, while sometimes increasing the psychological distress with explicit threats. From a psycholinguistic perspective, the verbal abuse cannot be explained solely as an outpouring of spontaneous anger. Analysis of the context of the documentary narrative shows that the perpetrator's behavior is more accurately understood as the result of an interaction between unresolved past trauma, fear of children's independence in adolescence, and technology-based coercive control efforts aimed at maintaining the victim's closeness and emotional dependence on the perpetrator. The language of "protection" used by the perpetrator serves as a cognitive rationalization of actions that communicatively cause fear and isolation. These findings confirm that disrespectful strategies and psycholinguistic motivations complement each other in explaining digital verbal abuse, while expanding the scope of the study to the realm of core family relationships that have been rarely touched by cyberbullying and digital indecency research. In practical terms, the combination of repeated identity attacks with anonymous threats can be an early indicator for schools, counselors, and authorities to recognize patterns of coercive control, including when the perpetrator comes from a close family circle.

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