



RESEARCH PAPER

Toxic Positivity in Feminist Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Shiza Shahid's TED Talk

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the discursive construal of toxic positivity in the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid. The study aims to determine transitivity patterns, processes and participants, and explains how they linguistically build toxic positivity, further explaining them in socio-cultural settings. The study applied both the Transitivity Model of Halliday (1985) for textual analysis and the three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis of Fairclough (1989) to the interpretation and explanation of a text. The results showed that most of the processes were Material, Relational, and Mental, which describe self-belief, moral strength, and emotional composure as alternatives to structural critique and thus linguistically construe toxic positivity. The work is relevant to discourse analysts, feminist scholars, and communication researchers because it helps shed light on how motivational feminist discourse can propagate the false hope and make endurance a moral obligation instead of a right of the group.

KEYWORDS Discursive construal, Toxic Positivity, Transitivity, Feminist Discourse

Introduction

Toxic positivity is the overgeneralization of a positive attitude to the point that it suppresses or dismisses negative feelings, suffering, or discomfort (Sokal et al., 2020; Bosveld, 2020). It is seen in the fact that people are supposed to always see the positive side or maintain optimism, no matter the situation, thus negating the right to struggle with emotions. This kind of positivity turns out to be toxic when it imposes silence on suffering and proposes that happiness is a choice and that everything can be conquered by attitude only. According to Trifan (2016), this type of self-centered optimism focuses on personal change and ignores structural and social causes of the hardship. In this paradigm, positivity is no longer empowering, but coercive, since it requires people to rebuild the world of their own inner, without questioning the world surrounding them. As a result, a linguistic trend known as toxic positivity (Bosveld, 2021; Ehrenreich, 2009) appears as a speech practice that masks limitation as liberation and suffering as a mindset failure- eventually as an ideological weapon that supports the status quo.

Critical Discourse Analysis, Positive Discourse Analysis, and Toxic or Forced Positive Discourse Analysis

In discourse studies, language is perceived as a social practice in which ideologies are created, maintained, and challenged. Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) has been developed based on the framework by Martin (1999, 2004) to understand how discourse has the power to empower, inspire, and unite communities (Bartlett, 2012, 2017; Hughes, 2020; Macgilchrist, 2007). PDA concentrates on the manner in which speakers use hopeful

and resistance-oriented discourses to rebuild oppressive realities, and tends to supplement the critical deconstructive orientation of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Nevertheless, whereas PDA emphasizes positive applications of language, the idea of Forced or Toxic Positive Discourse (FPOSD) focuses on the reverse side of optimism, in which positivity is prescriptive, moralized, and ideologically motivated. Bosveld (2021), Ehrenreich (2009), and Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022) are some of the scholars who have started to conceptualize FPOSD as a unique linguistic phenomenon, but it is still a less-researched area. In contrast to PDA, which reinvents empowerment, FPOSDA has the same critical purpose as CDA and seeks to deconstruct discourse in order to reveal how apparently well-intentioned rhetoric is hiding power inequalities. In this way, even though CDA explores the processes of oppression, FPOSDA criticizes linguistic formations simulating empowerment but perpetuating inequality, which is a kind of false progressivism masquerading as moral hope.

Toxic Positivity and Feminism

Structurally, feminism, as Colebrook (2010) puts it, is connected with the idea of hope: a hope of change, equality and realization. However, this hope has come to refer to itself in the so-called post-feminist era as ironically intoxicating. Empowerment rhetoric usually conceals the limitations of the system, and it prompts women to internalize the responsibility of their liberation and neglect social systems that sustain inequality. The very notion of positivity of feminist discourse, therefore, can become a variant of toxic hope, of the utopian optimism that is free because it perseveres instead of making structural changes. The dialectic of hope and utopia by Colebrook (2010) depicts how a discourse about feminism can move towards empowerment and containment: hope allows seeing beyond the present, but becomes poisonous when redefining the discourse in terms of an impossible, ideal future. In this contradiction, language is decisive in defining the manner in which feminism expresses itself, as opposition or as acquiescence, as collective movement or as personal survival.

Rationale for the Current Study

The current research is the result of two overlapping requirements. To start with, the popular rhetoric of feminists of the female gender tends to propagate empowerment stories that are capable of replicating the same optimism they are seeking to criticize. Such discourses might be manifested as cruel optimism, a state where people tend to hold onto something that eventually hinders their well-being (Berlant, 2020). It is especially important in the context of feminist rhetoric, where emotional power is praised, but the critical analysis of the system is usually stifled. Second, although toxic or forced positivity in health communication (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022) and digital motivational discourse (Upadhyay et al., 2022) are increasingly studied as subjects of scholarly interest, feminist public discourses (in particular, in the Global South) remain largely untouched in this respect. In light of the cultural and ideological power of TED Talks as mediums of global feminist discourses, this paper will discuss how the presentation of Shiza Shahid discursively builds the discourse of toxic positivity. It explores the way of re-contextualizing empowerment as emotional compliance and how social critique is reorganized into moral obligation, through a critical lens.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

The study is based on the Transitivity Model from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1985,1994) and the Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA) developed by Fairclough (1989). The transitivity system developed by Halliday is one of the most important elements of the ideational metafunction of language that explains the way linguistic systems interpret human experience. It looks at clauses as arrangements of processes, participants, and circumstances that collectively make meaning in the form of who does what to whom and under what conditions. Transitivity analysis offers a perspective on the encoding of actions, perceptions, relationships, and states of being in the speakers through six types of processes: Material, Mental, Relational, Behavioral, Verbal, and Existential. The study examines the linguistic construction of agency, emotion, and ideology by Shiza Shahid by determining and classifying these processes and the participants involved in them. This functional-linguistic approach allows a systematic analysis of how grammatical structures bring out meanings involving empowerment, morality, and self-determination, which are the key components of the discourse of toxic positivity.

In order to supplement this micro-level linguistic analysis, the study relies on the interpretation and explanation levels of the Three-Dimensional Model that is used by Fairclough (1989), according to which the textual features are placed in the framework of the broader social, cultural, and ideological contexts. The interpretative aspect of the textual mode gives attention to the way of creating meaning by collaborating with the textual indications and the resources of the audience, the cognitive, cultural, and ideological knowledge of the audience. These interpretations are elaborated at the level of explanation in the broader frameworks of power, ideology, and institutional practice and evaluated as either perpetuating the norm or disrupting the norm of the discourse. The transitivity analysis was used as a descriptive basis in this work, determining the linguistic processes in which the toxic positivity is implemented. The interpretation and explanation of these findings were based on Fairclough's framework to reveal how the linguistic decision-making of Shiza Shahid reinforces and reflects the socio-cultural logic of false optimism in which the empowerment process is formulated as an individual moral obligation as opposed to a collective socio-political practice. It is precisely in this combination of these two models that one can have not only an accurate linguistic analysis but also a critical socio-ideological approach to the way toxic positivity functions in the discourse of feminism.

The studies on toxic positivity are methodologically heterogeneous. The discursive studies reveal that seemingly positive rhetoric may exclude the opposition and delegate the blame to others. On Facebook pages about endometriosis, Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022) demonstrated that the concept of pragma-dialectics, alongside critical theory and positivity normalization through SFL, restricts inclusion because it places the responsibility on the victims. This replacement of structural criticism is supported by media-text analyses: Beare and Boucaut (2025) have argued that the optimism of Ted Lasso is in line with corporate branding, with minimal homophobia; Karnovsky and Gobby (2024) have recorded counter-discourses to scripts of cruel wellbeing that require self-management in unfavorable circumstances. These works define the ideological interests of positivity without proceeding to clause-level explanation of the process of grammatical encoding of agency, evaluation, and identity in live persuasion.

Multimodal and qualitative work follows the path of positivity that is being packaged and spread through different methods. Anwary and Istiadah (2024) discovered on Instagram that visual-verbal resources mediate the construction of what they term healthy masculinity and erase structural harms. Pluhařová et al. (2023) narrated everyday stressors as a factor to push positivity as a norm of affect display, and phenomenological interviews in Putra et al. (2023) attributed enforced cheerfulness in adolescents to anger, disappointment, and invalidation. Scoping and conceptual reviews visualize such

definitional and psychosocial aspects as Premlal and Jose (2024) synthesized antecedents and consequences of toxic positivity, and Wyatt (2024) described how social media increases the repression of negative affect. Although these contributions determine harms and circulation patterns, they provide scanty explanations of the lexico-grammatical processes in terms of which speakers normalize self-discipline (be positive) and background social constraint.

Certain computational and measurement-based studies have been capable of illuminating the phenomenon of toxic positivity by providing valuable information on its detection and quantification, but generally, they do not provide an understanding of the textual level of the phenomenon. The earliest supervised dataset, in toxic positivity classification, was introduced by Upadhyay et al. (2022), and its baseline performance was high, but Bhat et al. (2021) proposed a taxonomy of workplace toxicity, which considers subtle and implicit harms that go beyond what is explicitly abusive. Similarly, Brassard-Gourdeau and Khoury (2019) enhanced the toxicity detection with sentiment analysis, thereby making their approaches less prone to keyword manipulation, and Gevers (2022) found linguistic features of toxic and non-toxic comments, such as lexical diversity and language standardness. Mixed-method research has also been conducted to determine the social impact of toxic positivity with more general implications. According to Roy et al. (2023), the online discussion of the movement of the hashtag # MeToo has more gender-based hostility. Salopek and Eastin (2024) examined the essence of perceived intentions of toxic positivity, which promotes upward social comparison and inauthentic self-presentation. Furthermore, Jain et al. (2024) demonstrated in their structural modeling that the feeling of dominance and the perceived control are one of key predictors of toxic positivity. These studies, though relevant in developing the measurement and mapping of the toxic positivity, still lack adequate information with regard to the role of language as a construct and a strengthening phenomenon. In particular, they do not concern themselves with how speakers give agency through material processes, desire and certainty through mental processes, and the value and identity construction through relations, all of which are important to normalize and create false optimism as an institution.

The gap for this study is thus linguistic and genre-specific. There is a little clause-level analysis of how participants in high-visibility, formal spoken performances constitute toxic positivity in relation to transitivity choices and participant structures, especially in non-Western feminist spaces. The current research project focuses on this gap by Hallidayan transitivity of a Pakistani feminist TED Talk, and locating the constructions thus achieved in terms of the interpretive and explanatory aspects of critical discourse analysis. By doing this, it will complement multimodal, thematic, and computational literatures (Anwary & Istiadah, 2024; Beare & Boucaut, 2025; Bhat et al., 2021; Brassard-Gourdeau & Khoury, 2019; Gevers, 2022; Jain et al., 2024; Karnoovsky & Gobby, 2024; Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022; Pluhařová et al., 2023; Premlal & Jose, 2024; Putra et al., 2023; Roy et al., 2023; Salopek & Eastin, 2024; Upadhyay et al., 2022; Wyatt, 2024) with a micro-analytic account of how false optimism is grammatically instantiated and socially consequential in feminist advocacy speech.

Material and Methods

Design of the Study

The current study employed a mixed-method approach to analyze the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid. The quantitative stage aimed at determining and classifying the types of processes, whereas the qualitative stage was aimed at interpreting and explaining the role of processes and participants in representing toxic positivity. Aliaga and Gunderson (2002)

argue that quantitative analysis involves the systematic measurement of phenomena, whereas qualitative inquiry, as argued by Neuman (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), is explanatory in its nature and provides deeper meaning and understanding of the phenomena. Such a combination made it possible to have descriptive and explanatory knowledge about the transitivity patterns of the chosen TED Talk, which guaranteed both methodological rigor and analytical consistency.

Procedure of Data Collection

The data for analysis comprised the text of the TED talk by Shiza Shahid, which was retrieved through the official TEDx Talks YouTube channel. The link for the sample TED Talk is given below:

Name	YouTube Link
Shiza Shahid	https://youtu.be/B9dm0PC0_b8?si=fGISwCkbr91NnInk

The data was chosen by purposive sampling, as it is thematically close to feminist stories on empowerment and perseverance. The video was transcribed using an online transcriber, *YouTube to Transcript*, which freely transcribes limited videos per day, and is available at https://youtubetotranscript.com/transcript?v=RAdQCkJI9CQ#google_vignette. The video was then listened to repeatedly to resolve the issues of spelling and some other errors found in the online-generated transcription.

Procedure for Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in two key steps: the transitivity analysis (Halliday, 1994) and the critical interpretation and explanation with the help of the CDA model proposed by Fairclough (1989). All the clauses in the transcript were coded according to the type of processes, i.e., Material, Mental, Relational, Behavioral, Verbal or Existential, and the participants, i.e., Actor, Goal, Sensor, Phenomenon, Carrier, Attribute, Token, Value, Sayer, Receiver and Verbiage, were also identified.

During the quantitative stage, the frequency of every process was identified in order to ascertain what patterns of language were most dominant. Then, in the qualitative stage, identified choices were examined to understand the contribution of the employed linguistic patterns to the discourse of toxic positivity. The interpretation was based on the way the processes were construing toxic positivity. Then, the significance of the choices made by Shiza Shahid was interpreted and explained in a broader socio-cultural context by applying the last two dimensions of Fairclough's model.

Results and Discussion

The current study aimed to determine the transitivity patterns, i.e., the processes and participants, in the TED Talk delivered by Shiza Shahid, and explain how these linguistic decisions were significant in building the discourse of toxic positivity. Also, it aimed to examine how socio-cultural elements affect and define her discourse in the context of Pakistani feminism. The section is organized under two sub-sections, each dealing with transitivity analysis and situating the interpretations and explanations in a broader socio-cultural context.

Transitivity Patterns and Their Role in Linguistic Construction of Toxic Positivity

The transitivity analysis of the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid was conducted to achieve the first aim of this study, which was to establish the language tool used in building toxic

positivity by the arrangement of processes and actors. The clauses of the TED Talk were analyzed systematically by applying the Transitivity System of Halliday (1994) to use the ideational metafunction of the Systemic Functional Linguistics to determine how various kinds of processes reflect the experiences, values, and worldview of Shiza Shahid. This step of analysis allowed having a linguistic basis for the further explanation and interpretation of the role of these choices in the discursive construction of toxic positivity in the larger socio-cultural context. Every clause was analyzed to identify the type of process, participants, and any other circumstances that came with it, and it was possible to quantify the frequency at which each of the process types was performed, as well as to identify the recurring participants that influenced the experiential meaning of the discourse.

Table 1 below shows the frequency of the six process types observed in the TED Talk. It is this quantitative summary that forms the foundation of comprehending the prevailing linguistic patterns that form the basis of assembling the discourse of toxic positivity in the discourse of Shiza Shahid.

Table 1
Frequencies of Different Types of Processes

Sr. No	Process Type	Frequencies			
		Modalized	Modulated	Neutral	Total
1	Material Process	04	06	69	79
2	Mental Process	05	05	27	37
	Of Cognition	02	02	17	21
	Of Perception	01	01	06	08
	Of Affection	0	0	01	01
	Desideration	02	02	03	07
3	Behavioral Process	0	0	01	01
4	Relational Process	02	01	72	76
	Identifying	0	0	31	31
	Attributive	02	01	32	35
	Possessive	0	0	10	10
5	Verbal Process	01	01	11	13
6	Existential Process	0	0	08	08
					Total: 214

Table 1 indicates the division of various types of processes that were found in the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid, and the number of these processes is 214. Material processes (79) were the most common, which is why there was a significant focus on action, achievement, and concrete work with the world. This superiority implies that the discourse of Shiza Shahid was mostly action-related, where agency and change were projected by doing and achieving. Relational processes were observed to be closely followed by 75 incidences with an identity (30), attributive (35), and possessive (10) subtypes. The fact that they are used so often shows a great emphasis on the definition of identities, attribution, and relationships of belonging or ownership, a crucial aspect in the creation of a narrative of empowerment and self-realization. Mental processes were fairly common, 37 instances being spread over cognition (21), perception (8), affection (1), and desideration (7), showing reflected and introspective aspects to the discourse, but not so dominant as action or definition. The less common frequency of verbal processes (13) and existential processes (8) points to the lack of focus on dialogue and statement of being. There was the least representation of behavioral processes, only one of which implied little description of physical manifestations of mental conditions. All these tendencies point to the fact that the discourse was dominated by doing and being, by foregrounding material accomplishments and relationship self-building at the cost of emotional display or verbal communication.

To further explain how these processes are spread in the discourse, Table 2 is given below to represent the key participants related to each type of process. This table has

identified the main human and non-human agents that operate within the identified processes, which is the way in which the agency, experience, and identity are discursively created in TED Talk by Shiza Shahid.

Table 2
Summary of Frequent Participants in Various Roles

Participant Role	Participants
Actor	I, my parents, she, they, the conditions, my best friend, he, the lessons, a text, Malala, we
Goal	us, the best education, it, her, you, the job, my phone, my decision, the people, them, girls, my career, the world, my talk, control, that, decisions
Range	my life, volunteering, that reality, my decision, my character, the next year, the leap, a battle, the movement, her struggle, my destiny, that
Receiver	everyone, I, you, her, them, to me
Senser	I, we, she, people, our heart, you.
Phenomenon	three lessons that I have learned; that these are useful; that something in my society was crumbling; what it meant to be discarded before you were ever born; the conditions that lead to hatred, violence, and resentment; that my very existence is a source of shame; more than you can ever imagine; that you have the power to influence anything that you are truly passionate about; that what Malala had inspired was the beginning of a movement that would change the face of our world; what this meant; to help her change the world and get girls in school; what it means to be a girl who struggles due to that human connection; what I believe must be changed
Carrier	I, my father, my mother, children, she, Malala, my career, people, our heart, it
Attribute	so honored and humbled, so nervous, born in Pakistan, orphaned, seven years old, married, in captivity, aware, a source of shame, critically wounded, secure, ready, terrified, okay, exciting year, grateful, shaken, angry
Token	the theme of today, the first lesson, the second lesson, the third and final lesson, this, that, it, 2012, the girl, we, I
Value	Start Now, knowledge is best acquired through a human connection, a privileged upbringing, the only female volunteer, the lessons, the beginning of a movement, a statement, a dream job, we are the ones that we have been waiting for, now or never, the greatest miracle, I am Malala.
Possessor	I, you, she, Malala, it
Possessed	a privileged upbringing, the power, an offer, a greater platform, a decision, one, all of these truths
Behaver	I
Sayer	I, she, Malala, people, it, you
Verbiage	Hello, Thank you, "Malala has been shot.", oh my God, what have they done, "I am Malala", "Can you ask them to help the other girls?", for being here.
Existent	rising poverty, gender imbalance, extremism and religious radicalism, terrorism, women, children, vigils, protests, critical moments, the truth, just us, no superheroes, moments

Table 2, which shows the distribution of participants in the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid, demonstrates that there is a high level of individual and collective agency, where *I* is the most common participant in the Material, Mental and Relational processes, which is the personal experience and active participation. There is a high frequency of such participants as *we, she, Malala, people*, which makes the agency of the individual become of communal and emphasizes collective human affiliation. Goals and Phenomena are based on learning, empowerment, and transformation, which are intentional interactions with the self and society. Attributes that describe the emotional and moral state of being *honored, terrified, or grateful* are connected to the Carriers: such as *I, she, Malala and people*, which display the relationship between vulnerability and strength. The Sayers and the Verbiages are communicative and expressive elements of the conversation, whereas the Existents, such as *rising poverty, gender imbalance, extremism, terrorism, vigils, protests, critical moments, just us, and no superheroes*, place the story in a broader social and existential context. The participant structure, as a whole, is focused on agency, empathy, and moral reflection to build a discourse that interweaves personal resilience with the social responsibility concept in general.

The transitivity analysis of the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid showed that her speech is mostly built based on Material, Relational, and Mental processes, which constitute the ideational basis of her verbal experience description. The most dominant discourse is the Material processes (79 instances), then come Relational processes (76 instances), and Mental processes (37 instances) are the third most common type. The other types of process, which are Verbal, Behavioral and Existential, are significantly less frequent but still quite important in determining the interpersonal and evaluative aspects of the talk. Shiza Shahid is linguistically placed in the realm of human action, self-reflection, and moral evaluation by the quantitative preponderance of these three dominant types of processes. The high frequency of the occurrence of such participants as *I, we, she, Malala, and people* in the different types of processes is an indication of human agency and personal responsibility discourse. These language patterns depict that the speaker frames her reality in the concepts of self-agency, emotional restraint, and group perseverance.

In the Hallidayan model, the Material process is the doing process, that is, it is a physical or metaphorical action performed on a Goal or Range by an Actor (Halliday, 1985). The prevalence of Material processes in the discourse by Shiza Shahid supports the rhetoric of constant movement and change. Personal adversity is linguistically repackaged as positive action. Experience is turned into a moralized process of self-empowerment, and pain is turned into a productive resource. This construction of grammar transforms suffering into an agency, which serves as one of the main roles of toxic positivity, namely, the ideological reorganization of suffering as a possibility to grow (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). Shiza Shahid foregrounds Material clauses, which give the leading role to individual will and strength; thus, positivity cannot be viewed as an emotional choice but as a moral duty.

The second prevailing type, Relational processes, is also a significant part of the ideological achievement of the talk. Through these processes, the speaker can define, identify and assign value to people, ideas, as well as actions. The Relational processes (identifying, attributive and possessive) in sentences like *I am Malala, You have the power to influence anything* and *We are the ones that we have been waiting for* convert identity and emotion into definite moral qualities. The linguistic patterning in this case places empowerment as an inherent and self-determined thing and not a situational or systemic thing. In the connections of the Carrier and the Attribute, and the Token and the Value, the self is always portrayed as a competent, moral and purposeful, whereas emotion is portrayed as a place of control and moral power. This building is very close to the theorization of toxic positivity by Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022), which is an ideology that promotes the internal willpower over the external conditions and calls on people to perceive their situation as being able to be completely changed by mental strength. So, the relational clauses in the talk of Shiza Shahid serve to re-moralize self-belief: to be confident, grateful and strong is now a linguistic act of virtue, and vulnerability and structural criticism are relegated.

This inward agency is further supported by the Mental processes that have been found in the data. The epistemic pattern in which awareness is celebrated as change is expressed in such processes as *I knew, I believe, I decide, and I understood*. The Sensor, which is mostly *I*, is a manifestation as the experience agent and the realizer. He creates mental constructions by means of which thought is action and cognition, a moral agency. Such confusion of the distinction between knowing and doing, between knowledge and effectiveness, is in line with the concept of Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022), who argues that the belief in self-knowledge and self-control being enough to overcome external barriers is the result of self-referential agency. In the linguistic sense, the discourse of Shiza Shahid is, therefore, the collapse of the reflection into resolution; to feel and to think is modeled as

the same thing as acting. As a result, resilience and hope are not depicted as a reaction to the limitations of the system but rather as the manifestation of the internally controlled will that makes the individual resistant to misfortune.

The linguistic configurations that have been identified are in line with the expectations in light of the TED Talk genre, which is typically a combination of autobiographical storytelling and a form of motivational education. Nevertheless, the measures of how far the transitivity patterns recreate the logic of self-sufficiency are striking and ideologically colored. The combination of Relational and Existential processes, which naturalize optimism as an ontological truth, is what was especially impressive and somewhat surprising. The personal endurance is associated with existential law in *the truth (Existent) is (Existential Process) there (Existential Process) are (Relational Identifying Process) no superheroes (Existent) and There's (Existential Process) just us (Existent)* clauses. The grammatical combination of Existential and Relational Identifying processes is effective to eliminate the external saviors in the field of morality and claim that the change is possible only inside the individual or the collective self. The clause structures in Hallidayan terms build up the structure of being as self-dependence and truth as an expression of a moral conviction. The existential framing linguistically precludes systemic critique, which suggests that personal transformation is the only significant way of change.

These existential clauses have ideological connotations that are more evident when they are taken together with relational processes. For example, in *We (Token) are (Relational Identifying Process) the ones we have been waiting for (Value)*, the relational identification combines the we-concept with the abstract concept of salvation, which generates what Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022) refers to as self-referential optimism, where empowerment is both the instrument and the outcome. The pronoun *we* plays the role of an agent and a beneficiary of change at the same time. In building the collective subject as the savior of itself, Shiza Shahid performs the process of structural dependency erasure linguistically. The expectation is self-fulfillment in this relational logic, and the ability to survive becomes a moral precondition of survival. This discursive act is reflective of the larger neoliberal narrative whereby people are entirely responsible for their health, irrespective of any form of external injustices.

The relational structure is used in the same way in *I (Token) am (Relational Identifying Process) Malala (Value)*, where personal identity is symbolically equated with a collective sign of courage and perseverance. This identification combines the self of the speaker with the global identity of Malala. All of this is in line with the definition of Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022) of the *heroic self* as the discursive expression of toxic positivity that transforms suffering into symbolic capital. By this identification, Shiza Shahid makes herself part of a character whose perseverance has already been mythologized, thus re-establishing the moral right of power and calmness. Nonetheless, the language impact is twofold: it brings about unity, but at the same time, it recreates the cultural norm according to which women are supposed to endure misfortunes gracefully. This identification then alters empathy into a form of obligation that it becomes an obligation to be Malala and not an emotional posture.

The relational possessive structures, *You (Possessor) have (Relational Possessive Process) the power (Possessed) to influence (Material Process) anything (Goal)* and *I (Possessor) had (Relational Possessive Process) the power (Possessed) to affect (Material Process) anything* are based on a similar logic. These constructions actualize linguistically the empowerment as ownership, agency of encoding as a form of possession. The inherent Material processes ("to influence," to affect) put the action in the sphere of personal property; power is something one has and can do as desired. This grammatical structure supports the ideology

of toxic positivity described by Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022), in which the ability is universalized and external restrictions are discursively eliminated. Failure or struggle then becomes moralized as the lack of inner power. This ideology is projected to the audience by the use of the second-person pronoun *you* to make empowerment a collective imperative and place personal success and moral value on equal footing.

The last stratum of linguistic structure is found in material and mental process clauses, e.g., *I (Actor: Conscious Agent) take (Material Process) control (Range) of my destiny (Circumstance of Matter) and I (Senser) decide (Mental Cognitive Process) [to change (Material Process) what {I (Senser) believe (Mental Perceptive Process) must be changed (Modalized Material Process)} (Phenomenon) (Phenomenon)*. These structures show a cognitive-material amalgamation where decision-making and bodily activity are put forward as complementary to each other. The internal determination (decide, believe) of the speaker is accomplished externally by transformation (change, take control), which reflects the Hallidayan concept of transitivity that involves the encoding of the interface between inner and outer experience. Conceptually, such amalgamation is an illustration of the definition of toxic positivity in Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022): this is a discourse of limited omnipotence: the person is described in the language as someone who can change indefinitely under limited but unrecognized conditions. In this regard, the language of Shiza Shahid is a dual gesture in itself; it proclaims the strength but linguistically suppresses the vulnerability, turning the ethical consideration into an inspirational assurance.

The transitivity and participant structures of the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid construct toxic positivity by normalizing agency via Material processes of the rebranding of struggle as purposeful action, moralizing identity via Relational processes of equating virtue with strength, and internalizing reality via Mental processes of positioning thought as transformation. All such linguistic patterns combine in producing a discourse that glorifies female persistence and hope, but at the same time ideologically stipulates that people can and need to transcend sociocultural restrictions by using inner resources only. Following the example of Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022), this discussion demonstrates that positivity, out of context with structural awareness, is linguistically toxic, a moral necessity disguised as empowerment. The speech by Shiza Shahid at TED Talk is a grammar of endurance that creates and performs their transitivity patterns and roles of participants. This forms a discourse in which optimism is not only articulated but enforced, and resilience is the new moral code of female success.

Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Toxic Positivity in Shiza Shahid's TED Talk

Interpretive and explanatory analysis of the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid, which was performed using the model by Fairclough (1989), sheds light on how linguistic strategies based on transitivity patterns help to shape, maintain, and legitimize a discourse of toxic positivity in the socio-cultural and institutional context of global feminist communication. The discourse at the level of interpretation functions as a continuous interaction of textual structures and resources (MRs) of both speaker and audience. The Relational, Material, and Mental processes, which were identified quite frequently, interact with a common cultural and ideological knowledge regarding perseverance, moral strength and self-transformation. By so doing, the discourse relies on already established social schemata that equate optimism to virtue and endurance to success. To an audience at a TED talk comfortable with inspirational stories, these linguistic structures trigger a system of inspirational optimism, placing affective regulation as a universal signifier of strength. On the Pakistani feminist scene, though, these very forms gain a slightly different echo, as they are in harmony with the well-established cultural norms that glorify female patience and

discourage feeling defenseless. Therefore, when the text and the background knowledge interrelate, the language of Shiza Shahid creates optimism as a moral and cultural responsibility.

On the meaning of the utterance level, there is a uniform inclination to internalize agency as the discourse indicates. Such lines as *You have the power to influence anything, I take control of my destiny, We are the ones that we have been waiting for* all linguistically perform a kind of self-enacted empowerment which excludes external socio-political circumstance. The possessive and identifying relational processes make social change a subject of self-possession and moral will. This tendency illustrates the fact that meaning is not only generated in the form of linguistic but also in common ideological assumptions regarding agency and responsibility. The patterns of transitivity that have been discovered, which are dominated by the Actors, Carriers, and Sensers such as *I, we, and you*, show a discourse in which the self is the source and the resolution of all experience. This, inside the interpretive frame of the model created by Fairclough, is a strong tool of ideological reproduction: the individual internalizes systemic burdens as personal responsibilities, making it perpetuating the larger ideological framework of toxic positivity created by Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022).

The coherence of the text as it is read on a global scale demonstrates a closely knit account of what may be called false optimism, a discourse in which hope is being discussed as something intrinsically redemptive, no matter the setting. Such optimism, though appealing to emotions, is false in the ideological understanding. It covers the asymmetries of structures by transforming group struggles into individualized quests. Such discursive metamorphoses as the lines *I am Malala* or *We are the ones that we have been waiting for* are illustrations of such metamorphosis: they are eliminating the gap between systemic oppression and individual survival, and in making identity a form of survival. These are read by the audience as statements of bravery, but they linguistically serve as moral dictates, as orders to stay positive in the face of structural injustice. The mechanisms of false optimism, as Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022) puts it, are a sort of symbolic exploitation: it transforms emotional endurance into a moral acting that does not cause but just continues the current order. As a result of this interpretive process, the talk by Shiza Shahid turns pain into virtue and constraint into choice and, as such, linguistically speaks to what Fairclough describes as ideological closure, a situation whereby discourse is made to seem empowering and preclinical to the acknowledgment of power asymmetries that generate suffering in the first place.

On the explanatory level, the situational context of the TED talk by Shiza Shahid is the key to the comprehension of how her speech is shaped by and influences social reality. Being a Pakistani female orator talking to the world TED audience, she exists in a two-ideological world, where, on the one hand, there are the Western institutional expectations of inspirational self-reliance, and, on the other hand, the local patriarchal cultural construct that glorifies feminine reticence and virtue. The preeminence of Relational and Mental processes in her speech is in line with the institutional requirements of TED that encourage affective stories of success amid challenges as opposed to structural commentary. The discourse, thus, fits in the category of the discourse, which Fairclough categorizes as a norm-conforming discourse, a type of communication that does not challenge the prevailing institutional ideology but replicates it. Although the message, on the surface, is about gender empowerment, the use of language cancels out the resistance by redefining structural inequality as a psychological inhibitor. This is a rhetorical obedience that provides an institutional legitimacy but not ideological resistance.

On the institutional level, the discourse is influenced by the communicative economy of TED that favors personal narratives that inspire hope, agency, and emotional uplifting. In this framework, the story told by Shiza Shahid meets the institutional demand of inspiration by introducing empowerment as an emotionally intense, self-contained phenomenon. The recurring factors of her identification with Malala and her focus on moral tenacity meet the TED formula of marketable optimism, in which personal toughness is a product of inspiration. But there is an ideological price to such positioning: the discourse makes feminism depoliticized in following this model, transforming it into an ideology of self-reformation. Her linguistic choices are shaped by the institutional structure and the reinforcement of the same.

At the social level, the discussion is involved in the international ideological cycle of neoliberal feminism in which the concept of empowerment is characterized by autonomy, productivity, and positivity. These values are linguistically embodied in the Material and Relational processes that prevail in the speech of Shiza Shahid. Phrases such as *I take control of my destiny* and *You have the power to influence anything* recreate the neoliberal logic of self-sufficiency, which vests all the responsibility of transformation in the individual. This substitution of structural analysis by personal agency is what Fairclough (1989) terms the naturalization of ideology, the process of turning historically specific beliefs into self-evident truth. This talk is thus deceptive in that it makes self-reliance a universal and moral necessity. To the audience placed in social realities of restricted movement, systemic inequality, or marginalization based on gender, such a message is predatory: it makes people responsible for circumstances they have limited power over, and idealizes a lack of emotion as the sign of value.

The exploitation inherent in this discourse is not actually coercive but metaphorical. Emotional regulation takes the form of social capital through the use of Relational Attributive clauses like *I am strong*, *I am grateful*, and *I am Malala*. The conversation derives ethical worth out of emotional work and turns grief into confessions of virtue. This rhetorical conversion resembles what Lecompte-Van Poucke (2022) refers to as the moral economy of positivity, where the necessity to be positive perpetuates more general ideological systems, including patriarchal, capitalist, and postcolonial. The same structure of relations and materiality that empowers the speaker also normalizes endurance as duty, which creates a form of ideological exploitation, but to a low degree, and is widespread.

Although the speech of Shiza Shahid in the TED Talk initially seems to challenge the patriarchal principles by predicting the power and voice of women in the foreground, its linguistic structure shows that it is more in line with the ideologies it is supposed to criticize. The discourse justifies the status quo of power, instead of changing it, by giving preference to self-belief over structural critique. It supports optimism as the ethical alternative to protest, making anger, sadness, or protest rhetorically silent. The discourse, in the terms used by Fairclough, is norm-conforming, yet ideologically complicated; that is, it is symbolically resistant within the frames of institutional conformity. This twofold role, which seems to be liberatory and, linguistically, keeps alive the logic of conformity, renders the discourse deceptive and, in a socio-cultural context, predatory. It teaches women to be patient instead of demanding, to change themselves instead of their situation.

The patterns of transitivity in the TED Talk by Shiza Shahid, therefore, serve as grammatical patterns as well as ideological processes. They bring about linguistic actualization of toxic positivity, a discursive practice of fake optimism: emotionally compelling and structurally conservative. The self comes out to be all-powerful yet limited, strong yet muffled. The language, as much as it glorifies the empowerment, hides the systemic forces that create the need to be positive in the first place. In this respect, the

discourse bears the imprint of what Fairclough (1989) defines as the dialectic of discourse and power in the sense that, at the same time, language is limited by social reality and generates the hierarchies it is supposed to overcome.

Conclusion

The current research critically analyzed how toxic positivity was discursively constructed in the TED talk by Shiza Shahid by means of combining the Transitivity Model of Halliday and the three-dimensional model of Fairclough. Through a mixed-method design, the analysis found that the construction of a discourse that privileges self-determination, emotional restraint, and individual agency in the name of empowerment involved the linguistic choices of participants to form a discourse, namely, the choice of processes, participants, and evaluation structures. The interpretation and explanation facets of the Fairclough model also uncovered that these linguistic patterns are being used in accordance with neoliberal ideologies of self-responsibility, where optimism is being posed as a moral requirement and structural inequalities are being concealed. The study has, therefore, established that toxic positivity in feminist discourse is a kind of invisible ideological manipulation mechanism that shifts the communal feminist struggle into individualized self-improvement discourses. These results highlight the importance of linguistic analysis in revealing how persuasive ideas of feminist rhetoric can unconsciously recreate the same systems it aims to oppose, to provide a critical point of view to scholars, educators, and discourse analysts interested in questioning the interaction between language, ideology, and social power in modern feminist rhetoric.

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