

## **Creating Joy in Hard Times: A Systemic Functional Analysis of Selected Commencement Speeches of the 2020 Dear Class Virtual Graduation**

Commencement speeches in graduation ceremonies serve as momentous occasions to celebrate and honour the graduates' academic achievements. On June 7, 2020, YouTube Originals hosted a live-streamed event called "Dear Class of 2020" to celebrate graduates who missed physical graduation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite the growing impact and significant academic value of these virtual commencement speeches in the digital age, they have remained under-researched. Therefore, within Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics theory (1985), this study aimed to answer two questions: 1) How are the experiential, interpersonal and textual metafunctions employed in the speeches of five celebrities from the Dear Class of 2020 virtual graduation event? 2) What themes emerge from the metafunctional choices used in the speeches of five celebrities from the Dear Class of 2020 virtual graduation?. Employing a qualitative approach, the study found that the material process was dominant across all speeches, primarily used to advise the graduates. In the interpersonal metafunction, declaratives were the most frequent mood to provide essential information, while imperatives ranked second. Textually, the selected speeches featured dominant topical themes that ensured coherent speech structures. The findings also revealed three main themes: 1) Empowering graduates and calling for action; 2) maintaining hope; and 3) Encouraging the pursuit of passion. This study suggested that virtual commencement speeches tend to display certain metafunctional linguistic features that could be comparable to those found in in-person commencement speeches. Yet, it is acknowledged that broader comparative research is required to explore differences and similarities and enhance the effectiveness of virtual speeches.

**Keywords:** Commencement Speech; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Dear Class of 2020; YouTube