

MH370 HEADLINES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EMOTIVE LANGUAGE IN TWO NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

The strategic use of emotive language in journalistic headlines serves to capture reader attention and evoke emotional responses. This study applies Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory to examine how New Straits Times and The Washington Post construct headlines related to Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 (MH370). By analyzing attitude systems (affect, judgment, and appreciation) and graduation systems (sharp and soft tones), the research identifies linguistic strategies that shape reader perception. Appraisal theory's focus on evaluative language directly informs headline construction by revealing how news discourse encodes emotion and stance. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes 10 headlines from each publication through content analysis, selected via homogeneous purposive sampling to ensure comparable contextual framing. While this sampling method facilitates targeted analysis, its limitation lies in potential selection bias, restricting generalizability. Cultural context emerges as a key determinant in the use of emotive language, as each outlet strategically aligns tone with audience expectations, though inherent biases may influence representation. The findings highlight both the power and risks of emotive headlines, emphasizing the balance between engagement and ethical journalism. Practical implications suggest that journalists should be mindful of cultural sensitivities and avoid sensationalism while maintaining reader interest. These insights offer valuable guidance for researchers, and media professionals in crafting responsible and compelling headlines.

Keywords: *Emotive Language; News Headlines; Cross Cultural Journalism; MH370*

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INTRODUCTION

Emotive language, defined as word choice intended to elicit emotional responses from audiences, plays a crucial role in modern journalism, particularly in news headlines. As the first point of contact between readers and news content, headlines serve as textual negotiators that must balance concision, clarity, and allurements. Research indicates that readers prefer creative headlines regardless of length or complexity, making emotive language fundamental in capturing attention, especially given the increasing competition between traditional and new media platforms in news production.

For this study, emotive language is operationalized based on Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory, specifically through the attitude system (affect, judgment, and appreciation) and graduation system (intensification and quantification). This framework enables a systematic evaluation of how headlines convey emotion, stance, and emphasis. The cultural relevance of this analysis lies in the distinct media landscapes of The Washington Post and New Straits Times. As a major U.S. publication, The Washington Post operates within a highly commercialized and politically charged media ecosystem, whereas New Straits Times, as a Malaysian newspaper, functions within a regulatory framework that influences editorial practices and language use. These differences provide a valuable basis for understanding how cultural context shapes the deployment of emotive language in news reporting.

While emotive language effectively enhances reader engagement, its pervasive use raises ethical concerns regarding journalistic integrity. Research highlights its potential to trigger strong emotions such as shock, fear, and distress, which can influence readers' perceptions of news events. Sensationalism, a practice where headlines are designed to provoke emotional reactions, is often linked to profit-driven media strategies that may compromise objectivity. For instance, headlines such as "MH370: 'This was no accident'" (The Washington Post) and "Hope fades as search enters final phase" (New Straits Times) demonstrate different degrees of emotional intensity and speculative framing, which may influence public perception of the event. This study, therefore, critically examines the ethical implications of such linguistic choices.

By conducting a comparative analysis of MH370-related headlines from The Washington Post and New Straits Times, this research assesses how emotive language varies across cultural contexts and whether its use aligns with ethical journalism standards. The ethical evaluation is informed by principles from the Society of Professional Journalists' (SPJ) Code of Ethics and the Malaysian National Union of Journalists' (NUJ) Code of Conduct, which emphasize accuracy, fairness, and responsibility in news reporting. This study addresses a gap in existing literature, as minimal research has explored how emotive language is employed in American and Malaysian headlines concerning the MH370 incident. By bridging this gap, the findings contribute to a broader discussion on the intersection of language, media ethics, and cultural influence in global journalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic Features and Emotive Language in News Headlines

The construction and impact of news headlines have been extensively studied through various linguistic perspectives. Emotive language, as defined by Macagno and Walton (2014), serves to communicate emotions, feelings, and desires, manifesting through various linguistic elements including nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, phrases, and sentences (Volkova et al., 2021). In the context

of news headlines, this linguistic phenomenon operates within what McArthur (1992) and Mozūraitytė (2015) term as "headline" - a specialized form of language constrained by space and designed to maximize impact through minimal wording. Headlines function as "textual negotiators" (Dor, 2003) between content and readers, employing various stylistic features such as unusual vocabulary, sensational elements, and phonetic devices (Hakobian & Krunkyan, 2009) to enhance engagement. The effectiveness of headlines is heavily influenced by cultural context and linguistic proficiency of the target audience (Sardor, 2023), with successful headlines striking a balance between informative content and reader engagement (Rhea, 1993). This delicate balance is particularly crucial as headlines shape initial reader perceptions and can significantly influence public understanding of news events (Hadidi et al., 2023).

Media discourse and emotive language

Research has extensively documented the role of emotive language in shaping media discourse and public perception across different cultural contexts. Studies examining emotive language in media (Absattar et al., 2022; Alkhamash, 2021; Koivunen et al., 2021) have demonstrated its power to evoke strong emotional responses and drive narrative framing. For instance, Alkhamash's (2021) analysis of social media discourse revealed striking contrasts in emotional tone when discussing women's sports achievements (using positive terms like "absolutely superb" and "best young talents") versus gender pay gaps (employing negative phrases like "squandered" and "outrageous").

In news headlines specifically, Bedřichová (2006) identified four key functions: summarizing news, grading story importance, serving as design elements, and capturing reader attention – with emotive language primarily serving the latter function. This emotional manipulation is particularly evident in cross-cultural comparisons, as demonstrated by Ahmed's (2020) analysis of British and American headlines covering Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's royal exit.

1. British newspapers employed dramatic negative framing;
 - a. *"Sussexes Dramatically Step Down as Senior Royals - WITHOUT - Telling Her Majesty, Charles or William"* (Daily Mail, Jan 9, 2020)
2. American outlets adopted a more positive tone by emphasizing their "wish" for "progressive" roles.
 - a. *"Harry and Meghan's Hard Exit: The couple's wish to carve out more "progressive" roles has led to the loss of perks, privileges and titles"* (The New York Times, Jan 20, 2020)

Such variations in emotional framing reflect deeper cultural contexts and media traditions, as evidenced by Bostan et al.'s (2020) quantitative study of emotional content in major news outlets like BBC, The Daily Mail, and Los Angeles Times, which identified prevalent emotions including anger, annoyance,

optimism, pride, and fear. Similarly, Taiwo's (2007) examination of Nigerian newspapers demonstrated how political headlines strategically use capitalization and exclamation marks to heighten emotional impact, as in "SORRY MY FOOT!"

These studies collectively demonstrate that emotive language in headlines not only reflects cultural values and media traditions but also serves as a sophisticated tool for audience engagement and perception management, though its effectiveness varies significantly across different societal contexts and news topics. Despite the growing body of literature on emotive language in news discourse, there is limited comparative research that examines how different media cultures construct headlines in response to the same global crisis. Existing studies tend to focus on national contexts (Bostan et al., 2020; Taiwo, 2007) or social media discourse (Alkhamash, 2021), leaving a significant gap in understanding how mainstream news outlets across different geopolitical settings employ emotive language in headline construction.

This study addresses this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of MH370-related headlines from The Washington Post (United States) and New Straits Times (Malaysia). By applying appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) and evaluating linguistic choices through cultural and ethical lenses, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how international news narratives are framed, the extent of sensationalism, and the ethical considerations in reporting aviation disasters.

Related Theoretical Frameworks

In order to analyse the use of emotive language in news headlines, the appraisal theory developed by Martin (1997), Martin and Rose (2003), and Martin and White (2005) was utilised as a model of language analysis, with specific focus to Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory for this study.

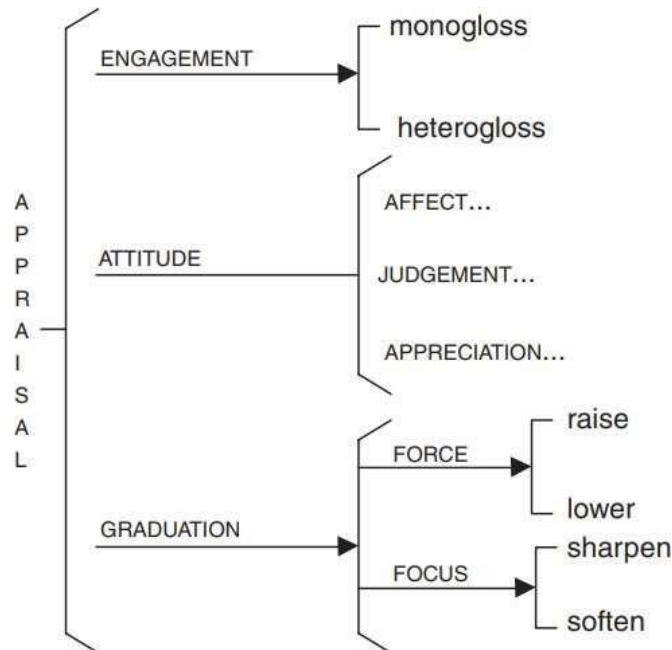
The framework introduces three aspects of attitude which are affect (positive and negative emotions), judgement (attitudes towards behaviour), and appreciation (value of semiotic and natural phenomena) that are responsible in managing behaviour. Meanwhile, graduation addresses the emotional commitment and personal involvement by the speaker towards a particular subject through the use of force that examines intensity of emotional discourse and focus that deals with the direct and indirectness of emotional expression. Lastly, engagement covers the use of language by writers to position readers towards the content presented. Simply, it involves the way writers or speakers include their audience in the experiences expressed during discourse. Martin and White's (2005) model depicts two types of engagement, which are monogloss that deals with single

perspectives, and heterogloss that covers multiple perspectives for diverse interpretations.

Figure 1. System of appraisal (Martin & White, 2005)

METHOD

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges the existence of multiple realities shaped by social constructs (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Following a qualitative research design, the



study employs content analysis as its primary method to examine the use of emotive language in MH370 news headlines from New Straits Times and The Washington Post. Content analysis, defined as a systematic technique for compressing text into coded categories (Berelson, 1952; Weber, 1990), enables rational inferences from texts within their contexts (Krippendorff, 2004). This interpretative approach is particularly suitable for understanding how and why these newspapers utilized emotive language in their headlines covering the MH370 incident.

For the setting, this study examines online newspaper articles from the New Straits Times (NST) and The Washington Post, two established English-language newspapers with significant international readership. The selection of these two outlets is based on their cultural distinctiveness in journalistic practices and audience reception:

1. New Straits Times (NST): Established in 1845, NST is Malaysia’s oldest and most widely circulated English-language newspaper. Its editorial policies are shaped by Malaysia’s socio-political environment, where news reporting is influenced by government-linked ownership and regulatory oversight (Zaharom & Wang, 2004). As such, NST provides insight into

emotive language use within a Southeast Asian media context, where journalistic discourse often aligns with national interests and culturally embedded values (Moten, 2019).

2. The Washington Post (WP): Founded in 1877, WP is a leading American news outlet known for its investigative journalism and editorial independence. Operating within the highly commercialized and politically polarized U.S. media landscape, WP offers a contrasting approach to emotive language use, where editorial framing often aligns with liberal or conservative ideological leanings (Entman, 2007; Kellner, 2020). As such, its headlines provide insights into Western media's tendency toward more overtly dramatic or critical language in crisis reporting.

The selection of these two newspapers is justified as they represent two distinct media ecosystems—one from Southeast Asia, where media regulation and national identity influence news narratives, and the other from the United States, where journalistic independence and competitive market forces shape editorial tone. By comparing these two culturally distinct news sources, this study examines how sociocultural and institutional factors shape emotive language in news reporting.

Sampling Strategy

Using homogeneous purposive sampling (Symon & Cassell, 2012), the study analyses 10 headlines from each newspaper that contain emotive language in their coverage of MH370. Headlines were selected by searching for MH370-related keywords in both newspapers' online archives, enabling a comparative analysis of how these two culturally distinct news outlets employed emotive language in their coverage of the incident.

While 10 headlines per outlet may appear small for broad generalization, qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The selected sample ensures that the analysis is focused and contextually rich, rather than relying on quantitative frequency-based patterns. Moreover, previous studies on emotive language in news headlines have successfully applied small sample sizes to extract meaningful linguistic patterns (Bedřichová, 2006; Bostan et al., 2020).

To mitigate concerns about limited sample representation, headlines were carefully selected based on linguistic salience rather than randomized selection, ensuring that each headline exemplifies the use of emotive language. Additionally, the study spans nearly a decade of coverage (2014–2023), ensuring temporal diversity in language use rather than a narrow timeframe analysis. Purposive sampling also carries the risk of selection bias (Patton, 2015). To mitigate this, headlines were selected systematically using keyword-based retrieval (MH370, missing plane, aviation disaster), ensuring consistency. The inclusion criteria for this study mandated that only headlines explicitly containing emotive language were chosen, reducing subjectivity.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study involved Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory, specifically focusing on attitude and graduation dimensions to analyse emotive language in MH370-related headlines. The coding scheme (Table 1) categorizes headlines based on attitude (positive, negative, or neutral) and graduation (sharp or soft intensity of emotional expression). Positive expressions are identified through celebratory language, while negative expressions are characterized by critical or alarmist tones. The graduation aspect distinguishes between sharp (intense, explicit) and soft (subtle, restrained) emotional expressions, which Martin and White (2005) argue differently influence reader relationships – sharp language aims to persuade readers toward a specific viewpoint, while soft language shows solidarity with divergent views.

Table 1. Coding scheme of appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005)

Coding scheme			
Attitude	Graduation	Type of Use	Scheme
Positive (POS)	Sharp (SH)	The use of celebratory language	POS(SH)
	Soft (SF)	Positive sentiments expressed more subtly.	POS(SF)
Negative (NEG)	Sharp (SH)	The use of critical tone or alarmist language	NEG(SH)
	Soft (SF)	Negative sentiments expressed more subtly.	NEG(SF)
Neutral (NEU)	-	Statements that do not strongly convey positive or negative feelings.	NEU

Data Collection

Data collection involved searching for "MH370" in both newspapers' online archives from March 2014 to December 2023, with 10 headlines selected from each outlet based on relevance. The extended timeframe was necessitated by limited data availability and the ongoing significance of the incident. Analysis was conducted through systematic manual coding of each headline according to the established framework, examining both the attitudinal orientation (POS, NEG, NEU) and the intensity of emotional expression (SH, SF) where applicable.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study present the emotive language used in headlines of News Straits Times and The Washington Post; the analysis studied the emotive colouring of the headlines, namely positive emotive language and negative emotive language. Headlines that promote neither are categorised under neutral language.

Positive emotive language (POS)

The analysis of positive emotive language depends on the use of a celebratory tone that expresses triumph and joy, and positive connotations in the headlines. The identified positive emotive language in headlines of News Straits Times and The Washington Post are presented with examples.

Table 2. Headlines portraying Positive Emotive Language (POS)

	News Straits Times (NST)	The Washington Post (TWP)
Sharp (SH)	Transport Ministry: Malaysia will not abandon search for MH370	-
Soft (SF)	[Exclusive] MH370: A wave of optimism sweeps team MH370: Search crew got excited upon receiving promising signal [NSTTV] Five years on, MH370 families lean on each other to carry on	MH370 experts think they've finally solved the mystery of the doomed Malaysia Airlines flight

Sharp (SH)

Following Martin and White's (2005) understanding of 'focus' in their appraisal theory categorised under graduation, the sharpening effect is conducted to strongly align readers into the value position being expressed, whether it is negative or positive. It seamlessly integrates with the second major sub-category of graduation, 'force', which addresses the degree of intensity, also known as intensification. A positive emotive language is considered sharp when it is high in intensity.

As presented in Table 2, the headline, "Transport Ministry: Malaysia will not abandon search for MH370" by New Straits Times expresses a positive and sharp emotive language. This is the case due to the phrase, "will not abandon search" that implies unwavering commitment and determination on behalf of the Malaysian government to continue search efforts in finding the MH370 aircraft. It conveys an empathetic and decisive tone that intensifies the commitment to the search. The phrase also instils confidence in readers that suggest the Transport Ministry's proactive stance against giving up. Therefore, the overall tone of the headline communicates an authoritative tone that the search for the MH370 aircraft is a priority at the highest level of governance.

Soft (SF)

A soft positive emotive language, according to Martin and White (2005), aims to indicate reserve towards a value position as a means to maintain solidarity with those whom such positivity would be considered as untoward. Simply, it suggests that the expression of positivity is relayed in a cautious and reserved manner to avoid appearing overly enthusiastic or assertive. A positive emotive language is considered soft when it is low in intensity.

The headline from News Straits Times, “[Exclusive] MH370: A wave of optimism sweeps team” denotes a positive and soft emotive language through the use of “optimism”. This choice of language is deliberate in suggesting a favourable outlook that revels in a sense of hope and confidence. The phrase, “a wave of optimism” expresses a strong image of conviction that suggests the possibility of positive developments and progress on the MH370-related search efforts. The overall tone of the headline signifies a reassuring and gentle tone to generate reader interest and attention to the story, especially with the addition of “Exclusive” at the beginning of the headline.

Another headline, “MH370: Search crew got excited upon receiving promising signal [NSTTV]” by New Straits Times is also classified as a positive and soft emotive language. It considers the positive connotations of “excited” and “promising” that exudes a positive belief in the situation and expresses the enthusiasm of the search team, contributing to the overall tone of optimism and anticipation. The adjective, “excited” implies a heightened sense of emotional state that indicates the search crew’s positive outlook towards receiving new information on MH370 whereabouts. The choice of word also conveys anticipation and hope for a breakthrough in the search. Moreover, the word, “promising” also adds confidence to the developing situation. Therefore, it shapes a hopeful narrative for readers that suggests the cultivated support of the ongoing search efforts.

The headline from New Straits Times, “Five years on, MH370 families lean on each other to carry on” also falls into the same category. It expresses a positive and soft emotive language due to its phrase, “lean on each other” that implies resilience and mutual support towards one another. The overall tone expresses an empathetic atmosphere that focuses on the strength and solidarity of the families. Although there are hints of despair implied in the headline, the predominant use of positive language frames the narrative as the families’ ability to endure and support each other through the challenging situation; the subtle undertone is merely used to recognise the experiences and feelings of the involved families. Therefore, the choice of language emitted in the headline is likely to evoke empathy and understanding from the readers by forming an emotional bond among the affected individuals.

From Table 2, there is only one headline from The Washington Post (TWP) that portrays POS. The headline, “MH370 experts think they’ve finally

solved the mystery of the doomed Malaysia Airlines flight” employs a positive and soft emotive language. It takes into consideration the word, “experts” that underscores the credibility of the information by suggesting that not only are professionals assuredly contributing to solving the MH370 mystery, but it also implies a certain level of authority and proficient role of seasoned professionals is involved.

Moreover, the phrase, “finally solved the mystery” adds a layer of achievement and anticipation to the narrative, feeding readers with the outlook that after a period of uncertainty, there is finally a tangible sense of breakthrough to the MH370 situation. Furthermore, the included adjective, “doomed” in the headline adds a bleak note, highlighting the gravity and history of the incident. The juxtaposition of the term combined with the positive language of the headline elicits a balanced tone that addresses the seriousness of the situation while maintaining an optimistic approach on recent developments.

Negative emotive language (NEG)

The analysis of negative emotive language depends on the use of a critical tone or alarmist language that uses condemnatory, pessimistic, and pejorative terms in the headlines. The identified negative emotive language in headlines of NST and TWP are presented with examples.

Table 3. Headlines portraying Negative Emotive Language (NEG)

	News Straits Times (NST)	The Washington Post (TWP)
Sharp (SH)	Aviation incidents hit home MH370 anniversary: Families in Beijing, KL gather, demand answers M’sia suspected MH370 downed in murder-suicide, claims Aussie ex-PM Singaporean comedian Jocelyn Chia’s MH370 joke doesn’t land with Malaysians [NSTTV]	Flight mystery deepens Investigators insist MH370 crash was an accident, not a mass murder-suicide by the pilot Why the Malaysian government’s problems go way deeper than the handling of MH370 The search for MH370 is still absurdly difficult. Let’s put it in perspective
Soft (SF)	MH370’s guessing game continues	Chinese MH370 families skeptical of new find; believe passengers ‘still out there’ Search for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 finally called off with mystery unresolved Lost: The mysterious, baffling disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370

Sharp (SH)

The effect of sharpening a language, whether negative or positive, is aimed to influence readers towards the value position being expressed (Martin & White, 2005). It falls under the 'focus' category of graduation and blends with 'force', the second category that tackles intensification, or degree of intensity. A negative emotive language is considered sharp when it is high in intensity.

In Table 3, the headline from NST, "Aviation incidents hit home" expresses a negative and sharp emotive language through the phrase "hit home". This choice of expression conveys a strong personal and emotional impact related to the missing MH370 aircraft. The metaphorical use of "hit home" is not just an acknowledgment of the event, but it also deeply resonates with the related individuals and communities on an emotional level, intensifying a lasting impression on their mental state; it suggests that the consequences are both felt and affect these individuals.

The emotional tone of the headline is stressed through the word, "hit", meant to be understood both figuratively and literally. In turn, it can evoke empathy among readers and prompt them to reflect on the situation based on the jarring effect of the headline which emphasises the tragedy experienced by those directly and indirectly affected. Not to mention, the headline's brevity also compacts the message being conveyed, allowing for a visceral response from readers to delve into the story.

The second headline, "MH370 anniversary: Families in Beijing, KL gather, demand answers" by New Straits Times is underscored as a negative and sharp emotive language, highlighting a sense of frustration and distress among the involved families. The phrase, "demand answers" expresses a palpable tone of discontent and urgency which conveys the idea that after a year of searching for answers, the families are growing restless and impatient at the presumed dearth of progress in the investigation. The use of the term "anniversary" alongside the MH370 incident implies a time interval that adds a layer of anguish to the headline. It accentuates the families' enduring poignancy and emotional toll imposed by the prolonged uncertainty surrounding the fate of their loved ones. Altogether, the headline conveys a sense of frustration and insistence of the families which invites empathy from readers to understand and commiserate with their struggles as they seek closure.

In the third headline, "M'sia suspected MH370 downed in murder-suicide, claims Aussie ex-PM" by New Straits Times expresses a negative and sharp emotive language which is underscored by the use of "suspected" and "claims". Not only does this linguistic choice carry a distressing tone to the headline, but it also emphasises the assertiveness of the statement made by Australia's former prime minister. The term "suspected" unveils an element of uncertainty which suggests the status of MH370 is still under investigation. Accordingly, it is prone to raise questions and stimulate feelings of unease among readers. The use of "claim" further amplifies the headline as a bold assertion by a prominent figure,

“Aussie ex-PM” which adds authority to the statement. It sets the stage for a potentially controversial discussion surrounding the MH370 incident which encourages readers to read further into the article for more context and details.

Examining the third headline presented in Table 3, “Singaporean comedian Jocelyn Chia’s MH370 joke doesn’t land with Malaysians [NSTTV]”, by New Straits Times, it utilises a negative and sharp emotive language, marked by the inclusion of the term “doesn’t land” in relation to the missing MH370 aircraft. This phrase, usually associated with a failed attempt, imparts a distinctly unfavourable connotation, especially when considering the context of the comedian, Jocelyn Chia’s joke. The wordplay does not inject humour nor any positive outlook to the situation, but it instead heightens the insensitivity portrayed by the comedian who had complete disregard for the weight of the MH370 incident and the individuals affected. Essentially, the headline successfully underscored the inappropriateness of the joke which communicates a sense of disapproval and discomfort among the readers. Ultimately, it urges readers to contemplate the suitability of humour in relation to heavy topics like the MH370 incident.

Meanwhile analysing the headline showcased in Table 3, “Flight mystery deepens” by The Washington Post, it employs a negative and sharp emotive language, evident in the choice of term, “deepens” in regards to the MH370 aircraft. The word choice indicates that the headline goes beyond merely addressing the ongoing mystery of the aircraft, instead it also conveys a degree of intensity, implying that the conundrum surrounding MH370 is proceeding into a more complex and troubling situation. It fosters a sense of heightened suspense which prompts readers to delve into the evolving nature of the aircraft’s enigma. The term “mystery” incorporated into the headline adds an air of interest to the situation, highlighting the brevity of the situation. Not only does it capture the attention of readers, but it also encourages them to engage with the article and dive into the mystery of MH370.

The next headline, “Investigators insist MH370 crash was an accident, not a mass murder-suicide by the pilot” by The Washington Post reveals a deliberate use of a negative and sharp emotive language, highlighted by the use of “insist” and the contrasting phrase, “accident, not a mass murder-suicide”. This language choice not only accentuates the investigators’ assertiveness, but it also adds a distressing undertone for the possibility of an alternate narrative. The articulated phrase of “accident, not a mass murder-suicide” discloses a frightening interpretation that is foreseeable to evoke strong emotional response among readers. The juxtaposition of the words, “accident” and “mass murder-suicide” creates a stark contradiction and a shift in perception from a perceived unintentional event to a deliberate and motive-driven act. Accordingly, it adds complexity to the narrative and impels readers to grapple with the notion of a motive driving the incident. Nevertheless, the word “insist” expresses conviction

on behalf of the investigators to refute the possibility of intentional malpractice which adds an authoritative tone to the headline.

Another headline, “Why the Malaysian government’s problems go way deeper than the handling of MH370” by The Washington Post portrays a negative and sharp emotive language, signified by the term “go way deeper”. The language choice suggests that the issue has progressed beyond surface-level, adding a sense of complexity and implying that the Malaysian government has a more critical issue at hand than the MH370 situation. The phrase, “go way deeper” conveys an intricacy to the problem that surpasses superficial concerns. It denotes the idea that issues are deeply rooted and require a nuanced understanding due to the layer of severity in the situation. Indirectly, it consoles readers to understand the complexity and challenges of the government’s efforts in resolving the mystery of the missing MH370 aircraft.

The last headline, “The search for MH370 is still absurdly difficult. Let's put it in perspective” by The Washington Post showcases a negative and sharp emotive language. It takes into account the emphasis of “still absurdly difficult” that suggests the continuous challenges faced by the investigators involved in the MH370 search. The term “still” suggests an enduring and unremitting difficulty that persisted over time which indicates a prolonged struggle of the investigators in the search for MH370, despite the unified efforts of nations worldwide. Another layer of intensity is added to the equation through the phrasing of “absurdly difficult” which insinuates how the situation has been both unexpected and exasperating to handle and resolve. It exudes a tone of frustration in the headline that fixates readers to probe further, especially with the second part of the headline, “Let’s put it in perspective” which invites readers to understand the complexity of the search.

Soft (SF)

Based on Martin and White (2005), using a soft negative emotive language suggests the speaker or writer is not strongly committed to a particular viewpoint, but rather they offer a conciliatory gesture aimed to build unity with individuals of different outlooks. A negative emotive language is considered soft when it is low in intensity.

The first headline by NST, “MH370’s guessing game continues” reveals the use of a negative and soft emotive language, emphasised by the phrase “guessing game continues”. The linguistic choice underlines the sense of uncertainty and the insufficient clarity of MH370’s status which paints a picture of continual ambiguity and speculative. The phrase “guessing game” introduces volatility in the fate of the missing aircraft which invites speculations more than justifiable evidence. Not to mention, the addition of “continues” further vexes the headline and highlights the continuous and prolonged efforts in investigating the case. Accordingly, it contributes to a sense of disappointment and frustration which sets the tone for readers to empathise with.

The Washington Post's headline, "Chinese MH370 families skeptical of new find; believe passengers 'still out there'" utilises a negative and soft emotive language denoted by the word, "skeptical" and phrasing of, "believe passengers 'still out there'". The choice of language conveys an atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty among the families which invites speculation on the reliability of the new find, hence the emphasis on "skeptical" in the headline.

Moreover, the phrase, "believe passengers are 'still out there'" introduces another layer of doubt which expresses the families' denial in the disappearance of their loved ones. Clearly, it denotes a strong emotional impact that suggests the families have not received the closure they have hoped for in this lingering mystery. It also implies their belief of a slim chance that their loved ones are still alive yet undiscovered which contributed to the distressing tone of the headline. Accordingly, readers may experience a wave of emotions, especially empathy in understanding the situation from the families' viewpoint of loss and helplessness.

The next headline, "Search for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 finally called off with mystery unresolved" by The Washington Post expresses a negative and soft emotive language, emphasised by the terms, "finally called off" and "mystery unresolved". The linguistic choice implies a lack of resolution and closure to the MH370 case, expressing a despaired tone in the headline. The phrase, "finally called off" suggests the culmination of the search team's efforts in solving the mysterious case of MH370 which implies the taxing process that has led to the collective agreement of ceasing further exploration on the incident. It is further emphasised on by the inclusion of "finally" which underscores the per chance exhaustion faced by the investigators involved. The weight of the headline is further accentuated by the phrase, "mystery unresolved" which denotes how the disappearance of MH370 is left unanswered, inducing a sense of frustration and uncertainty among readers.

Examining the last headline, "Lost: The mysterious, baffling disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370" by The Washington Post reveals a negative and soft emotive language, particularly expressed through the terms, "mysterious, baffling experience" which denotes a sense of doubt and a lack of resolution to the situation. Nevertheless, it does not contribute to an intense tone in the headline; instead, it describes the event in a contemplative manner. The word "mysterious" describes the enigma surrounding MH370 with the extensive questions and ambiguous details left unanswered. This language choice intrigues readers to delve into the article with curiosity and understand the complexity of the case. In the same manner, the expression of "baffling disappearance" highlights the perplexity of MH370 which fosters a sense of discernment among readers.

Neutral language (NEU)

According to Hamdi Khalis Kadri et al. (2020), neutral language refers to communication that remains impartial without a distinct emotional tone or

opinion; it neither conveys a positive or negative sentiment towards the topic discussed, and instead provides facts objectively. The identified neutral language in headlines of New Straits Times and The Washington Post are presented with examples.

Table 4. Headlines Portraying Neutral language (NEU)

News Straits Times (NST)	The Washington Post (TWP)
Nine years on, families of MH370 victims still waiting for truth on incident	An ‘unprecedented missing aircraft mystery’

The headline, “Nine years on, families of MH370 victims still waiting for truth on incident” by New Straits Times expresses a neutral language with no direct indication of a positive or negative sentiment. Instead, it merely focuses on the passage of time and the families’ unwavering commitment to await further developments of the MH370 case.

In this context, the chronological marker, “Nine years on” highlights the duration of time that has passed since the incident, structured in a just manner that conveys a factual aspect of time passing without focusing on its emotional impact. In parallel, the phrase, “still waiting for truth on incident” is structured in an objective manner that neither downplays the perseverance of the affected families nor does it exude sensationalism. Instead, the lack of emotional cues enable readers to resonate and empathise with the families without being influenced by preconceived emotional framings. This neutral approach enables readers to interpret the information with unbiased judgement and encourages them to form their own opinions.

In the analysis of the headline, “An ‘unprecedented missing aircraft mystery’” by The Washington Post reveals a notable neutral language. This is the case due to the adoption of a descriptive tone that underscores the objective and factual representation of the headline. The absence of blatant positive or negative connotations helps maintain the headline’s impartial stance on the issue. Therefore, its focus is on conveying information more than influencing readers' emotions.

The term, “unprecedented missing aircraft mystery” was structured in single quotes (‘’) which highlights the headline’s objectivity rather than its subjective approach to the MH370 incident. It suggests that the phrase does not reflect the stance of the headline but rather a phrase that merely encapsulates the situation suitably. Accordingly, the stylistic approach substantiates the neutrality of the headline.

Comparison of emotive language use between news sources

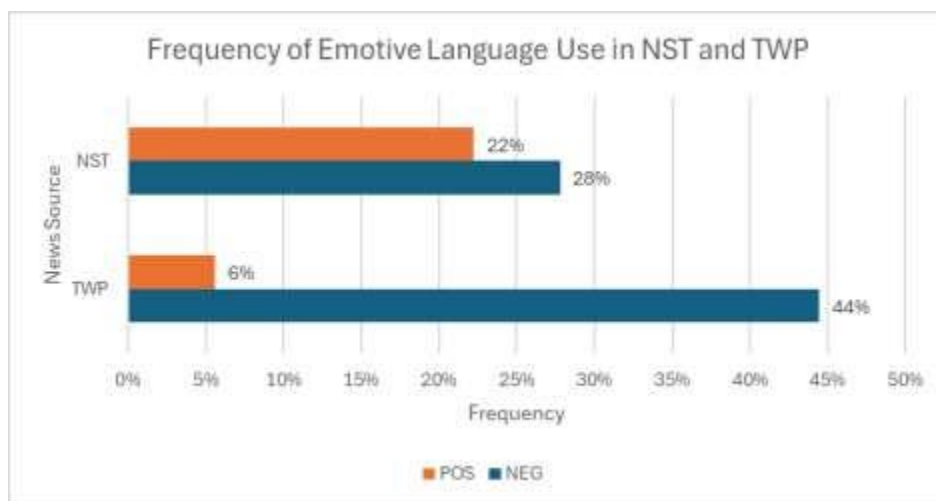
The focus of comparison will be on the frequency of emotive language use and tone of the 10 headlines each in both news sources. It should also be noted that out of the 10 headlines analysed in each news source in 4.1, one headline

from each news outlet were categorised as exhibiting neutral language due to the portrayal of a factual and just reportage. Since it played no relevance to the purpose of the study, the headlines were omitted in this section of analysis. This examination seeks to understand the multifaceted approach of each news source in shaping reader perception through the use of emotive language. The analysis will encompass the frequency of positive (POS) and negative (NEG) emotive language, distinguishing the use of sharp (SH) and soft (SF) tones, as well as explore how these factors contribute to the sensationalism and sensitivity of the headlines. Neutral language will not be addressed in this section as it does not contribute to the overall emotional tone of the headlines.

Comparison of frequency of emotive language use in NST and TWP

As shown in Figure 2, the positive emotive language use in New Straits Times is present in 22% of its total headlines, suggesting a notable emphasis on optimistic coverage of the MH370 incident. Contrarily, the negative emotive language use in New Straits Times stands at 28% of the headlines, implying that considerable focus is on acknowledging the challenges and conflicts revolving around the missing Malaysia Airlines.

Figure 2. Frequency of emotive language use in NST and TWP



Comparatively, The Washington Post conveys 6% of positive emotive language use in the headlines addressing MH370 which denotes the idea that there is a relatively lower emphasis on positive developments in the case. Conversely, the negative emotive language use is more prominent in the news source, constituting 44% of the headlines. This indicates that a significant focus has been placed on addressing the controversies and issues surrounding the disappearance of the MH370.

Comparison of frequency of tone in New Straits Times and The Washington Post

Figure 3. Frequency of tone use in NST and TWP

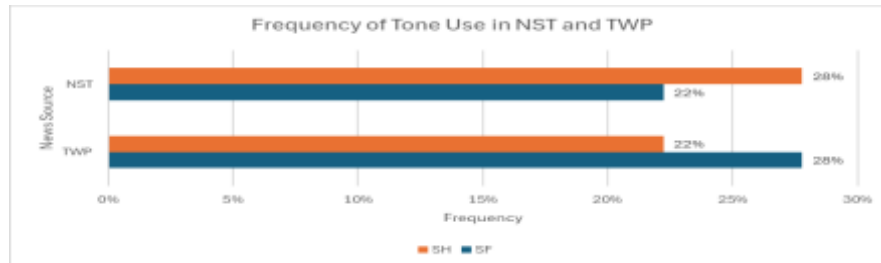


Figure 3 shows that New Straits Times utilises 28% of sharp emotive language in the headlines, signifying higher stress on impactful language to relay information and influence reader perception on the MH370 incident. Meanwhile, the soft emotive language used in the news source stands at 22%, indicative of the subtle emphasis on empathy and care when addressing the complexities of the missing aircraft.

Contrastingly, the data is seemingly reversed in The Washington Post with the sharp emotive language standing at 22% of its overall headlines and the soft emotive language at 28%. It implies that The Washington Post stresses the infusion of empathy and discernment in its reporting, indicating a nuanced approach in addressing the MH370 mystery.

Relationship between frequency of emotive language use and tone in establishing sensationalism and sensitivity in NST and TWP

To effectively analyse the emotive language use in the MH370 news-related headlines of New Straits Times and The Washington Post, the exploration of the relationship between the frequency of emotive language and overall tone on its contribution to sensationalism and sensitivity must be acknowledged. This section intends to shed light on whether the news outlets are prone to sensationalism or sensitivity based on the frequency of use as portrayed in Figure 1 and 2.

In New Straits Times, the combination of positive emotive language (22%) and negative emotive language (28%) does not depict a striking difference which suggests the news' balanced approach at the topic that does not contribute to the idea of sensationalism, and when compared to its use of sharp (28%) and soft (22%) tones, it accentuates the level of sensitivity and cognisance portrayed by New Straits Times in addressing the complexities and challenges of the MH370 disappearance.

On the other hand, The Washington Post demonstrates an evident disparity between its use of positive emotive language (6%) and negative emotive language

(44%) in their headlines that discuss MH370. This tilt towards negative language distinctively promotes a sensationalised perspective on the MH370 case by placing substantial emphasis on the issues and challenges of the MH370 incident, denoting the idea of suspense and weight in the headlines' narrative. Nevertheless, the balanced distribution of sharp (22%) and soft (28%) tones for the news source reveals that the crafted headlines with negative emotive language do not necessarily paint a sensationalistic perspective. Even though the negative emotive language dominates the headlines related to MH370 in The Washington Post, it can be ascertained that the slightly higher percentage of soft tones serve to humanise the portrayal of MH370 by adding a layer of empathy and sensitivity to the headlines. Regardless, the excessive focus on MH370 controversies expresses harmful undertones to the relevant parties involved as readers may resort to incrimination.

Essentially, the analysis of emotive language use in New Straits Times and The Washington Post reveals a slightly different approach at influencing reader interest. While New Straits Times practises a conscientious approach of sharp and soft tones in their headlines with no direct preference for positive or negative emotive language, The Washington Post primarily adopts the negative emotive language and balances it with the use of soft and sharp tones to express their headlines.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the usage of emotive language in MH370-related news headlines between New Straits Times (NST) and The Washington Post (WP), revealing significant differences in their approaches to headline construction. The analysis, based on Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory, demonstrated that while NST maintained a balanced approach between positive (22%) and negative (28%) emotive language, WP showed a marked preference for negative emotive language (44%) compared to positive (6%). This disparity reflects distinct editorial strategies: NST aimed for comprehensive coverage while WP favoured more dramatic headlines, potentially to drive reader engagement.

The analysis of tone through the graduation aspect of the appraisal theory revealed comparable usage of sharp and soft tones in both publications, though with slight variations. NST employed more sharp tones (28%) while WP favoured soft tones (28%), indicating different approaches to narrative framing. These findings align with Volkova et al.'s (2021) assertion that emotional content in text comprises various linguistic elements, from individual words to complete sentences, all contributing to the overall narrative impact.

This study extends existing research on media framing and emotive language by providing a cross-cultural analysis of headline construction in crisis reporting. Prior studies (e.g., Bostan et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2020) have established that emotive language is integral to news audience engagement, yet few have

systematically compared Western and Southeast Asian media approaches to framing aviation disasters. By demonstrating how NST and WP framed the MH370 incident through distinct emotive strategies, this study provides empirical evidence that media structures, regulatory frameworks, and audience expectations significantly influence linguistic choices in news discourse.

Furthermore, cultural influences emerged as a key determinant in shaping headlines. NST's moderate tone and regulatory adherence align with Malaysia's multicultural environment, where news reporting emphasizes social harmony, sensitivity, and national unity (Zaharom & Wang, 2004). In contrast, WP's stronger reliance on negative emotive language reflects the Western journalistic tradition of investigative depth, editorial independence, and commercial-driven engagement (Entman, 2007). These distinctions underscore how different media landscapes shape narrative choices, with NST fostering resilience and cautious optimism, while WP amplifies the tragic and unresolved aspects of the MH370 crisis.

The study's implications are threefold: it provides researchers with insights into media bias and framing effects across different cultural contexts; it encourages ethical journalistic practices by highlighting the impact of emotive language on public perception; and it contributes to the academic understanding of emotive language use in crisis reporting. However, future research would benefit from employing mixed methods to better assess reader behavior, utilizing the full scope of Martin and White's appraisal theory, and expanding the analysis to other significant news events across Malaysian and American media landscapes.

These findings underscore the connection between cultural context, editorial strategy, and linguistic choice in headline construction. The distinct approaches of NST and WP demonstrate how cultural values and media traditions influence the framing of international news events, ultimately shaping public understanding and emotional response to major incidents like the MH370 disappearance.

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