A Systemic Functional Linguistics Analysis of News Reports on Child Abuse

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Abstract

The general perspectives of child abuse issues are derived from the mainstream media. However, the media's tendency to sensationalise the cases to attract viewership may distort the readers' understanding and further propagate child maltreatment. This study investigates the language used in Malaysian news discourse on child abuse using Karpenko-Seccombe et al.'s (2020) method of analysis and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a theoretical framework. This qualitative study analyses 28 news articles published by the government-affiliated news platform, The Star, and independent news media, Free Malaysia Today. Findings revealed that victims are described as invisible and depersonalised entities while perpetrators are individuals with distinct characteristics. Further, the transitivity processes found in the excerpts were Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal, and Existential processes. The emotive and evaluative language revealed the roles and attitudes of the journalists in presenting the news. Moreover, direct and indirect quotations expose the journalists' need to stress the importance and severity of the requests delivered by news actors. Lastly, this study may benefit language students, policymakers, and academicians in linguistics and media studies.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Child Abuse, News Discourse, Transitivity processes, Modality Processes

Introduction

While preventive measures in mitigating the issue have been undertaken, statistics reveal that the mistreatment of children has gradually increased (Yusop, 2016). The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021) reports that while there is a decrease in cases in 2020 (5,858 known cases) compared to 2019 (6,382 known cases), the number of victims only constitutes 0.06 per cent of Malaysian children in 2020. Thus, there is a likelihood that many cases go

unreported. Against the culture of saving face backdropping Malaysia, the underreporting of abuse cases may be merited to several facets including stigma, disgrace, and a culture that values silence (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2020). Child abuse is rooted in a complicated personal, cultural, and social medley (Popović, 2018). They are parts of a continuum of traditional and culturally acceptable parenting practices where authoritarian disciplines are expected. While the low number of reporting appears to insinuate indifference from lawmakers and civil society, public attention and media awareness regarding child abuse seems to be increasing.

News reports are one influential form of media, as it renders information regarding the circumstances involved in a particular event (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). The public primarily acquires information regarding child abuse from the mainstream media (Goldman & Grimbeek, 2015). Döring and Walter (2019) claim that media reporting aids in culminating the silence around child maltreatment. It provides victims with a voice, provokes a provincial, national, and global response, and designs the foundation for criminal investigations and convictions. These notions are possible due to the media's nature as the platform that bridges the current happenings in the world to society. However, scholars argue that the general understanding of child abuse is hewed. Fundamentally, the news does not objectively portray reality instead it reconstructs and recapitulates reality (Abbas & Talaat, 2019). It is a definitive domain that harbours and discloses multifarious ideologies that shape and veil the public's viewpoints (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). Additionally, it tends to reflect the interests and ideologies of those in power. Lonne and Parton (2014) claim that institutionalised voices deliberately partake in public debates concerning child abuse and neglect. Consequently, they are positively regarded and highlighted as child abuse scandals and tragedies unfurl. In contrast, news reports constructs child abuse victims and perpetrators in a way that may propagate stereotypical notions in readers. Karpenko-Seccombe et al (2022) revealed that child abuse victims are frequently portrayed as invisible and vulnerable entities, while perpetrators are explicitly portrayed by their actions. This practice indubitably leads the readers to believe that victims are an anonymous group, while perpetrators as distinguishable offenders with abnormal temperaments. The latter raises a concern as perpetrators are a heterogeneous group of people with diverse backgrounds and personalities (Harper & Hogue, 2014). In short, the media has a significant role in shaping the public's perspectives through their depictions of child abuse. By delimiting the voices of the vulnerable, journalists may reinforce an ideological belief by simply showing a one-sided institutionalised perspective on the abuse. Considering the limited number of research on this area of study, the present study is conducted to analyse the language used in portraying child abuse victims and perpetrators. In short, the media has a significant role in shaping the public's perspectives through their depictions of child abuse.

Statement of the Problem

Past studies revealed that there are some concerns about the media coverage of child abuse. Kanakapura (2021) asserts that news on child abuse emphasises the controversial and inhumane outcomes of individual cases. Narratives that accentuate the abuse with no details on preventive measures may further negatively influence the readers and audience (Weatherred, 2017), leading to the audience deeming themselves helpless in ameliorating the issues. Nevertheless, whether these descriptions correspond to the reporting style used by the Malaysian press is undetermined, especially considering the media-controlled environment backdropping Malaysia (Wong, 2015). Moreover, many studies have explored

child abuse with different approaches and materials. Some approaches include meta-analyses of research publications (Stoltenborgh, 2015), a cross-cultural analysis of the perspectives in the United States, Ghana, and Nigeria (Fakunmoju, 2013), and others. However, this study focuses on analysing news reports on child abuse. Some studies investigating child abuse news discourse in countries include Bangladesh (Atiqul Haque et al., 2020), and Australia and England (Lonne & Parton, 2014). Yet, there are virtually very few studies of news discourse on child abuse conducted in the Malaysian context. Niner et al (2013) analysed two newspaper platforms reporting on child abuse published in 2010 and claimed their study to be the first sustained analysis of child abuse in the Malaysian media. Another study focused on the maternal figures present in the media representations of child abuse (Niner et al., 2014). These studies were conducted approximately ten years ago thus indicating that there is limited coverage in analysing news reports on child abuse in Malaysia. Some studies focused on analysing news discourse on child abuse utilised content analysis (Hove, 2013; Weatherred, 2017), corpus analysis (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022) and feminist discourse analysis (Niner et al., 2013). Yet, there is less attention devoted to analysing reports on child abuse using Halliday's (1973) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. This paper also minimises the gap observed in previous studies on child abuse reports by utilising transitivity and modality processes. This study explores the language used by journalists in reporting child abuse cases through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

Three research questions have been formulated including
   (1) What are the linguistic features used to describe the perpetrator and victim in the newspaper discourse on child abuse?
   (2) What are the transitivity processes utilised in the news discourse of child abuse?
   (3) What are the modality processes found in the newspaper discourse?

Significance of the Study
This study may contribute to the domain of SFL analysis on news discourse of child abuse. Firstly, it may benefit the general public, especially news readers by raising awareness of how victims and perpetrators of abuse are portrayed. It may encourage readers to carefully understand a particular news report may be ideologically influenced by journalists. Theoretically, it may expose linguistics students to the vices and virtues associated with the language used in the media by analysing the underlying meaning and ideologies in a text. It may also benefit journalists in manoeuvring stakeholders' expectations, mainly child rights activists, for neutral and unexaggerated reporting to avoid inciting fear and general misconceptions of the abuse. On the other hand, social workers may use this study as a baseline to manage the general perception of issues affecting vulnerable people by collaborating with journalists. Lastly, this study hopes to encourage future researchers to construct studies on news discourse, especially on reporting abuse or domestic violence victims. It may expose researchers to the way a reader interprets and absorbs information in their reality.

Literature Review
Discourse
The meaning of discourse has been contemplated by scholars. Kamalu and Osisanwo (2015) refer to discourse as language in use. Discourse contributes to the intricate associations constituting social life, that is the meaning and making of meaning (Fairclough, 2013).

Philosophically, it is a product and an agent of power operating through selection, exclusion, and inclusion (Foucault, 1981, as cited in Kramer, 2019). It comprises the social design and issues of social class and structure (Xie, 2018) and actions piloted by social representatives used in various settings including the media (Al-Ahmad & Awwad, 2020). Thus, the presence of ideologies in news discourse is inescapable.

Newspaper Discourse
The news is essentially an influential platform that promulgates newsworthy events to its viewership. It is one of the most persuasive venues (Mayer, 2012) that carries objective and trustworthy facts necessary for a democratic country (Xie, 2018). Further, it develops narratives Mayer (2012), debates Gunster & Saurette (2014), ideological spheres and corresponding constructions of subjectivity Gunster et al (2018), affective patterns, involvement, and disengagement practices (Hackett et al (2017) that constructs understandings and participation of readers towards a particular issue. However, studies likewise suggest that news is not entirely objective and neutral. News undoubtedly forms specific renditions of social reality that are instituted and communicated by elite groups.

Child Abuse
Child abuse or child maltreatment is a public health crisis that impacts the lives of approximately one-third of global youths (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015) and results in significant aftermath for the victims including the affected children, their families, and society (Killion, 2017). Existing literature has devised a range of prognosticators including poverty, family pressure (Lansford et al., 2015), and parents' adverse ascription concerning children's demeanours (Berlin et al., 2013). Common descriptions of child abuse include emotional abuse and neglect, which entails the harmful deeds that endanger the child's development and the failure to fulfil their emotional needs (Bijilsma et al., 2022). Further, physical abuse and neglect involve the deliberate use of physical force to cause physical damage and negligence to care for a child's physical well-being (Bijilsma et al., 2022).

Previous studies on child abuse in the Malaysian context
Past studies on child abuse in the Malaysian context revealed some factors contributing to child maltreatment including socioeconomic factors. Shaari et al (2015) discovered a significant relationship between the rise in the unemployment rate and child abuse cases from 1982 to 2011. Further, a study on incest victims disclosed that financial difficulties force parents, to work long duration of hours leaving their children unsupervised thus allowing the other parental figure to sexually exploit their children (Ahmad & Nasir, 2010, as cited in Guat-Sim and Choo, 2016). Moreover, perpetrators are typically found to be adults in a trusted relationship with the child victim, especially parents (Ahmed et al., 2016; Choot et al., 2011). Conversely, child abuse cases are largely underreported in Malaysia. Underreporting may aggravate issues of child abuse as it hinders effective preventive measures. This practice may be attributed to severe penalties imposed on the perpetrator, where they may hold the status as the family's sole provider, and the failure of medical practitioners to recognise child maltreatment (Abdullah et al., 2017). In a study focused on Malaysian educators, Choo et al (2013) impute this phenomenon to the lack of knowledge of the existence of reporting channels. Besides, one legislative issue resulting in underreporting is anonymity, which is typically granted to those who make the allegations of abuse but not to those who are

accused (Harper & Hogue, 2015). The high probability of the public knowing the perpetrator increases the potential risk of the victims being identified.

News on Child Abuse in the Malaysian Context

While there is a decrease in the number of child abuse reports in 2020, with 5,858 cases compared to 6,382 in 2019, there is a likelihood that most cases go unreported (The Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Children suspected of being abused are under-reported to child protection services (LeCroy & Milligan-LeCroy, 2020) while reported cases were only received by nearby hospitals and police stations, deliberately leaving the Malaysia Social Welfare Department nescient (Ibrahim & Jarimal, 2018). Niner et al (2014) affirm that the cumulative number of cases reported only accounts for ten per cent of total cases perpetrated due to strict cultural values about the maintenance of the face, leading victims and their families unable to report the assault committed against them for fear of being shunned by society.

Nevertheless, the public does not have a first-hand understanding of this crisis thus their knowledge of the matter is typically formed through the media (Mejia et al., 2012). Maydell (2017) opines that for any critical issue to gain public attention, it must be framed as a social concern which is indubitably a procedure usually enacted by media. Lonne and Parton (2014) second this notion as few issues provoked considerably high profile, emotionally-charged news coverage and public uproar on the maltreatment of children. Niner et al (2014) state that crime reports in the press normally portray both victim and perpetrator as individuals while more expansive obligations of government, laws, or society are seldom depicted. The press is frequently criticised for sensationalising individual, unrepresentative cases and for failing to regard the socioeconomic context. Regardless of the frequency of the cases, child abuse often becomes the limelight of the news and entertainment media due to its sensationalised nature (Mulugeta, 2014). This notion explains that stories depicting child maltreatment inevitably garner the public's attention as a person's "life-changing tragedy is news" (Vengadesan, 2019). Persistent forms of child negligence or emotional vitriol were often discounted while unusual representations like "lurid child sexual abuse" and murder were typically accentuated (Niner et al., 2014). This style of news coverage illustrates a contorted portrait of maltreatment as child welfare agencies' interference is typically in cases of negligence and vulnerability to domestic violence (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012). The overexposure to extreme yet rare child abuse cases may over-sensitise the audience to specific risks consequently manifesting moral panic.

Representation of Institutionalised Voices in the News Media

The representation of victims has metamorphosed from being forgotten actors of criminal justice policy to the backbone of political discourse on law and order (McAlinden, 2021). Meanwhile, Karpenko-Seccombe et al (2022) reveal that journalists and institutional representatives mediate a significant part of news discourse on child abuse. These representatives, including the police, government officials, and others, are undoubtedly reliable sources of information for the newspapers. This implies that this practice allows journalists to influence readers' perceptions of the reported event and garner public support (Harper and Treadwell, 2013).

One facet of news production is the journalists' reliance on a strictly demarcated set of official and legitimised sources of information (Fairclough, 2013). This significantly reduces and excludes the voices of non-institutionalised groups of advocators and victims themselves,

resulting in a one-sided, distorted, and institutionalised view of reality. Karpenko-Seccombe et al (2022) note that news commonly grants institutionalised representatives the medium to directly express themselves through verbatim quotations. Direct speech is more personalised and subliminally engaging (Eerland et al., 2018) and more importantly, gives the issue credibility simply due to the newsworthiness of the important news actors (van Dijk, 2015). In contrast, indirect speech angles the issue further from the reader as in the case of victims' voices. Nevertheless, journalists do not only echo the statements delivered by authoritative figures. Citing journalistic norms, Pollack and Allern (2014) assert that highlighting the role of the authoritative figures as the public wielder of power is one aspect of journalists' self-appointed 'societal duty.' This means that journalists may disguise their attitudes on the issue through the voices of an authoritative figure. Hence, the voices of authoritative figures are commonly used in news reports to indicate objectivity and reflect journalists' attitudes.

Representation of Child Victims in the News Media

Scholars find that child victims are typically represented as invisible and silent. The voices of child victims and innocent parents, contextual information, and social and structural facts underpinning the abuse are typically absent in news coverage (Lonne & Parton, 2014). The voices of this group may offer the most insight into the issue compared to the reported information (Davies et al., 2015) and its omission may contribute to the misunderstandings of factors leading to child victimisation and dismantling children's resistance to abusive behaviours (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). Additionally, they are commonly represented using evaluative and emotive language (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). One key attribute in informing public and political impressions of children's victimhood is age. Children are often viewed as inherently vulnerable and thus immediately considered innocent by their age or status as children (Furedi, 2013). Factual mention of age and other minor descriptive attributes reflect the impersonal and impassive way of police or court reports in representing child victims thus propagating the invisibility and silence of victims (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). On occasions where they are specifically identified, they are represented through an image of a survivor. Other descriptive attributes include gender and the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Meanwhile, Harper and Hogue (2015) and Popovic (2018) emphasise the news' preferential reporting of child abuse cases involving celebrities due to its newsworthiness. It is indubitable that the motivation behind journalists' reporting is to maximise the newsworthiness of a reported event and increase readership (Hove et al., 2013). Hence, child victims are represented as silent sufferers and only attributed to their generalised descriptive attributes.

Representation of Abuse Perpetrators in the News Media

The public has an inherent desire of knowing the latest person convicted of a crime due to its pathological nature (Harper & Hogue, 2015). This interest may contribute to the tendency for news reports to provide detailed descriptions of the crimes and offenders. A specified description of the crime and offender indubitably increases the newsworthiness of an article (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). Additionally, Davies et al (2015) find that 97 per cent of news articles report one descriptive attribute relating to the offender including age, gender, and the relationship to the child. Abbas and Talaat (2019) note that this practice obscures the perpetrators' identity. Employing age to describe the perpetrators and the victim essentially depicts the power imbalance between the parties (Furedi, 2013; McAlinden, 2014). In terms of gender, men are attributed to their gender to indicate masculinity which may reinforce the

stereotypical view of violence being associated with toxic masculinity (Abbas & Talaat, 2019). In contrast, journalists tend to associate women with their illicit sexuality and their need for employment to their inability to stop child victims from facing maltreatment (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the cases with the abusers in positions of authority, such as educators, sports coaches, and religious leaders, receive preferential reporting (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). Categorising the social actors in news into their socioeconomic classes and their role in society is a commonly used approach used by journalists (Karpenko-Seccombe, 2022; Davies et al., 2015). Highlighting the roles of the social actors, including kinship status and occupations, may incite an emotional reaction in news readers (Abbas & Talaat, 2019).

Moreover, there is a deliberate removal of perpetrators in news reporting. Instead, the perpetrators are identified according to the misconduct they have committed. Lonne and Gillespie (2014) assert that news on child abuse is usually constructed into generalised narratives which lack important details about the victim and context. Al Fairi (2021) attributes this phenomenon to journalists' inclination to obscure the roles of perpetrators and emphasise their roles and actions. This act of generalising perpetrators into one singular group may distance readers from the prospect of perpetrators being indistinguishable. Harper and Hogue (2014) claim that perpetrators are usually described according to the explicit and abnormal facets of their personalities which may propagate the idea that perpetrators are discernible. This is concerning as perpetrators are heterogenous groups of people with diverse backgrounds and personalities. Hence, the perpetrators are generally depicted according to their descriptive attributes.

Theoretical Framework
Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)
SFL has three general social functions including ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function.
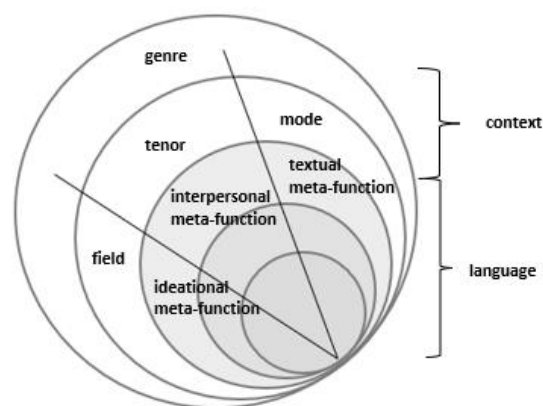

Figure 1 *Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)*

Note. Adapted from *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*, by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), Routledge. 2022 by Routledge.

Firstly, the ideational function enables a researcher to scrutinise how discourse participants express their experiences through transitivity processes (Cordeiro, 2018). Transitivity processes comprise three interacting constituents including the process, the participants involved in the process, and any associated circumstantial factors such as time, manner, or

cause. Six basic types of Transitivity processes are Material, Mental, Behavioural, Verbal, Relational, and Existential (Cordeiro, 2018).

Furthermore, the interpersonal function assists in investigating the discourse participants' relationship by analysing cohesive elements associated with lexical distribution. It cyphers the interaction between language users. Three constituents of the interpersonal function include the Mood, the Subject, which is a nominal type of element, and a verbal type element called the Finite. Mood complements and comment adjuncts validate propositions, obligations, and inclinations revealed in expressions of attitudes and opinions. It comprises two types including indicative clauses such as declarative and interrogative, and imperative. Meanwhile, modality can be categorised into two types including modalisation and modulation. Modalisation involves the validity of information, which can be further categorised into probability or possibility and usuality (Farhat, 2016). Probability alludes to how distinctly possible that the information being exchanged is true. The degree of probability can be rendered in adverbs such as probably, may, possibly, and certainly. Further, the frequency of which the information being exchanged is true and the degree of it can also be illustrated through adverbs including always, usually, sometimes, and often.

On the other hand, modulation is associated with the willingness of a speaker to offer and the responsibility of the hearer or reader in command (Zhai & Jingxia, 2018). Two subclassifications involved in modulation are inclination and obligation. The former denotes a speaker's willingness and alacrity to fulfil an offer. It is realised through items such as will, would, want to, willingness to, and others. Meanwhile, the latter involves the responsibility or pressure imposed on the addressee to meet the addresser's demand. The degrees of obligation are delivered by items such as should, wanted to, required to, and others (Zhai & Jingxia, 2018).
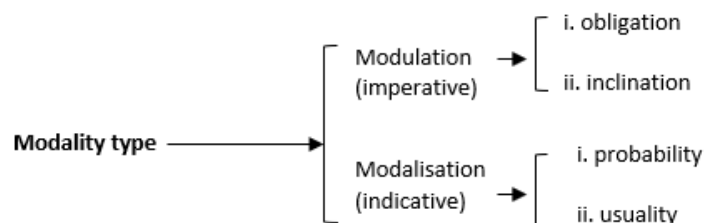

Figure 2 *Modality types*

Note. Adapted from *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*, by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), Routledge. 2022 by Routledge.

The last function which is the textual function looks at the organisation of text and is mainly interested in the position of theme and rheme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Thus, the ideational metafunction is to construe people's inner and outer experience of the world, the interpersonal metafunction is for speakers to enact their speech roles and construct relationships with each other, and the textual metafunction is to create a coherent and understandable text. In this study, the researcher will only focus on the transitivity patterns and the mode and modality of discourse.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology as it relies on textual data and interpretations (Creswell, 2014). Thus, reflexivity is exercised whereby the researcher considers the way their role and personal and cultural backgrounds may influence their

interpretations (Sutton, 2015). The reflection of the researcher before and after the study will be inevitably bound to their existing biases and personal understanding of reality. Thus, reflectivity compels researchers to consider and clearly express their position, worldview, perspectives, and biases.

Data Collection

28 online news articles that reflect the criteria set for this study were selected. Firstly, the articles collected are local news reports on child abuse in Malaysia published from January 2019 to January 2023. They are extracted from the homepages and news pages of both platforms thus automatically excluding commentary articles. Further, keywords associated with the study including "child abuse and maltreatment," "emotional and physical abuse," "childhood trauma," and "Malaysia" were manually searched in the two digital newspaper platforms. These keywords were selected due to their consistent appearance in past literature concerning child abuse (Hove et al., 2013; Nier et al., 2014; Davies et al., 2015). This is to ensure the newspaper articles collected are relevant to the objectives of this study.

Furthermore, The Star news platform was chosen due to its brand trust scores (65%) in Malaysia, indicating its trustworthiness. The news coverage of the government-aligned platform was proven to be more objective than other conventional papers, New Strait Times and The Sun (Wong, 2015). The second news platform chosen for this study is Free Malaysia Today, an independent news outlet. The objectivity of its news coverage is debatable despite its editorial policy emphasising centrism and neutrality. Independent and alternative media are not precisely obligated to government interventions resulting in questionable reporting quality (Hussein, 2018). Therefore, it can be inferred that alternative media may have a severe reduction in annotation than traditional outlets resulting in less reliability and an increase in the concerns of ethical issues.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected, the researcher analysed the descriptive attributes, transitivity processes, and modality processes involved in the news reports on child abuse. Firstly, Karpenko-Seccombe et al.'s (2020) method of analysis was employed to answer the first research question regarding the linguistic features describing the perpetrators and victims. Their corpus analysis study is based on van Leeuwen's (2008), as cited in Karpenko-Seccombe et al (2020) taxonomy regarding the representation of social actors in media. The elements were based on the information derived from their analysis using a corpus tool. These elements were further discussed in Table 3.1.

Table 1
Representation of child abuse victims and perpetrators in media

Elements	Explanation
Generalisation and collectivisation	Statistics, Quantity
Descriptive attributes	- Age - Family status - Nationality, ethnicity, and race - Social status, education - Victim or perpetrator of abuse - Morality, health and disability
Emotive, evaluative, and personality adjectives	- Positive (adorable, beautiful, brave, etc.) - Negative (rebellious, malevolent, etc.) - Weakness and vulnerability

Note. Adapted from *Representations of Child Sexual Abuse in Jamaica: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study of Popular News Media*, by Karpenko-Seccombe (2022), MDPI AG. 2022 by MDPI AG.

This study also utilised Halliday's (1973) SFL which comprises the ideational process involving transitivity, and the interpersonal process involving mode and modality. Firstly, the linguistic features of texts were investigated through their lexical choices as it is an essential element of the ideological production in news discourse. It has the potential to manipulate the readers' perception of the event the news reported. Comparing the news reports from two different platforms eventually prove that linguistic codes do not objectively replicate reality, as they deduce, systematise, and classify discourse subjects and reveal different world perceptions (Wang & Liu, 2015) Next, the transitivity processes materialised in the news discourse were investigated. Lastly, the interpersonal relationship of social actors was determined by modality processes.

Table 2
Systemic Functional Linguistics

Elements of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)	Explanation
Transitivity	- Material process (Actor, Action, Target, etc.) - Mental (Senser, Cognitive processes, Phenomenon) - Relational process (Carrier, Attribute, Token, Value) - Verbal process (Sayer, Verbiage), Target, Circumstances - Existential process (Subject, Existence)
Modality	- Modalisation (probability and usuality) - Modulation (obligation and inclination)

Note. Adapted from *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*, by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), Routledge. 2022 by Routledge.

Findings and Discussion
This section presents the findings and discussion derived from the news reports. The excerpts were analysed according to the research questions including

1. What are the linguistic features used to describe the perpetrator and victim in the newspaper discourse on child abuse?
2. What are the transitivity processes found in the news discourse of child abuse?
3. What are the modality processes encoded in the newspaper discourse on child abuse?

Descriptive attributes of child abuse victims

Table 3
Generalisation and collectivisation representation of child abuse victims

No	News platform	News title	Excerpt
1	The Star	Child abuse: 37 out of 88 cases reported in Melaka involve sexual abuse, says exco	The Melaka Social Welfare Department (JKM) recorded *88 child abuse cases* … and of the total 37 involved sexual abuse, says State Women's Affairs, Family Development and Welfare Committee chairman Datuk Kalsom Nordin.
2	Free Malaysia Today	1 in 10 children likely to be a victim of abuse	… suspected online child sexual abuse reported from Malaysia had increased from *183,407 cases* in 2019 to *204,506* in 2020.
3	Free Malaysia Today	DAP rep calls for Rina's resignation as child sexual abuse cases rise	…data from the police stated that *1,721 cases* were reported nationwide in 2020, …an average of 286 reports a month. This figure went up by 50% last year.

All of the excerpts from The Star and Free Malaysia Today reported an increase in child abuse cases over a period. Both newspaper platforms applied a generalised and collectivistic approach in reporting child abuse cases. The cases are reported in numerical expressions thus denuding the identification and experiences of the victims. This quantitative representation may implicate readers to view child victims as an anonymous group as their individuality is obscured. Harper and Hogue (2015) corroborate this by attributing journalists' inclination to provide victims with anonymity due to existing child protection laws. This finding is similar to McAlinden (2014), who reveals that the experiences of child abuse victims are relegated to statistical overviews deprived of personal features. Using statistics inevitably sanitises the narratives of child abuse cases, resulting in a desensitised society and propagating the normalisation of abuse. Hence, it can be inferred that the severity of reports on child abuse cases may diminish when child victims are represented as statistics.

Descriptive attributes of the child abuse perpetrators in news discourse

Table 4
Descriptive attributes of child abuse victims

No	News platform	News title	Excerpt
4	The Star 9 September 2022	Minister slammed for belittling child actress	"…has been heavily criticised for saying that the *15-year-old* should not have "shamed" herself and her father for going public with her allegations
5	The Star 12 October 2022	Three-month-old baby dies from suspected abuse, father arrested in Kedah	"A *three-month-old baby* has died, allegedly due to *abuse by his father*…"
6	Free Malaysia Today 11 January 2019	Child abuse: Strong medical reports help convict offenders, says paediatrician	*…a two-year-old toddler with a family died due to a head injury. Two years later, the family's second child also died due to a head injury as well.*
7	Free Malaysia Today 9 May 2022	Remention of missing boy's murder case set for June 21	The remention of a case involving two individuals charged with the *murder of Eric Chang, a four-year-old* reported missing in Sarawak since March, has been set for June 21 by the magistrates' court in Kuching today.

All of the excerpts demonstrate the child victims were represented by their age descriptions. The descriptive attributes of the victims found in this study are reflected in previous studies (Furedi, 2013; McAlinden, 2014; Davies et al., 2015; Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). A salient finding in excerpts 5 and 6 reveals the journalists' choice in using 'baby' and 'toddler' in their reporting. By conjuring the vulnerability and innocence of the child victim, the newsworthiness is increased while simultaneously evoking readers' sympathy. In comparison, simply referring to the teenage victim to her age indicates agency, as observed in "going public with her allegations." The emphasis on the vulnerable image reflects the inclination of the media to report crimes involving seemingly innocent victims (Furedi, 2013). In this case, the power imbalance between the offender and the victim is amplified. McAlinden (2014) ratifies how age emphasises the victim's virtuousness, thus intensifying the offender's culpability and pertinacious disposition. Moreover, the victims in excerpts 5, 6, and 7 are linked to their mortality, indicating their role as a causality of a crime. The excerpts demonstrate that the criminal acts were emphasised, as observed in 'allegations,' 'abuse,' 'head injury,' and 'murder.' Meanwhile, the victims were left discounted suggesting they are considered depersonalised entities with no rights and dignity as human beings. This can further propagate a society that is desensitised to child abuse cases.

Descriptive attributes of the child abuse perpetrators in news discourse

Table 5
Descriptive attributes of the perpetrators in news discourse

No	News platform	News title	Excerpt
9	The Star 21 December 2022	Accused of sexually abusing schoolgirl for child porn	*Goh* is also charged with *sexually assaulting the girl by touching her thigh with sexual intent…*
10	Free Malaysia Today 5 December 2021	Mother, lover remanded for alleged abuse of her son	*A mother of eight children* and *her lover*, believed to have abused her five-year-old son and *caused the boy's death*, …
11	Free Malaysia Today 6 January 2019	Man who attacked daughter for eating up his dinner arrested	A *man* who *scalded his eight-year-old daughter* after he was furious that there was *no food left for him* after work…

All of the excerpts showcase a comprehensive description of the offenders and crimes. Journalists are predisposed to impart personalised information about the offender and the crime to maximise the newsworthiness of an article (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). This reflects the public's voyeuristic inclination to cognise convicted individuals and their latest offences (Harper & Hogue, 2014). Thus, the public interest combined with the journalists' desire for sensationalism constitutes explicit descriptions of the offence and the actors.

In particular, the sexuality and marital status of the perpetrator in excerpt 10 were emphasised, implying her 'otherness.' Malaysian press implicates 'bad' mothers whose illicit sexuality and need for work expose their children to maltreatment (Niner et al., 2013). In a separate study, Niner et al. (2014) also claim cultural myths and patriarchal conventions of the decorous role and behaviour of women are reinforced by the news' inclination to put blame and disapprobation on mothers. In contrast, the perpetrator in excerpt 11 is described with emotionally laden lexical items such as 'scalded' and 'furious.' The use of evaluative and emotive language combined with indirect speech suggests the author's voice and interpretations of the event. Employing evaluative and emotive language is associated with newsworthiness (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). In a similar vein, the use of negative emotion in the press may postulate the possibility of creating the foundation for punitive thinking styles in readers (Harper and Hogue, 2015). This approach in reporting insinuates the immorality of the perpetrator. Davies et al. (2015) assert that this notion of the immoral perpetrator may assist in distancing journalists and readers from the discomfort of child abuse. Hence, both The Star and Free Malaysia Today provide a thorough description of the offenders and the crimes while leaving the victims backgrounded.

Material Process

Table 6
Free Malaysia Today: Material process

Excerpt 1: Stop silencing survivors of child abuse, group tells minister | Free Malaysia Today - 9 September 2022

The young actress	lodged	a police report on Monday alleging that *her father* sexually harassed her
Actor	Material	Goal

The transitivity analysis of the excerpt reveals a Material process encoded in the verbs 'lodged' and 'alleging.' The excerpt is in active voice whereby the victim is emphasised and her perpetrator is backgrounded. Firstly, the use of descriptive attributes such as "young" and her profession as an "actress" indicate the journalist's evaluative notion of the subject. It places a focus on the role the victim represents instead of empathetically describing her experiences. Employing evaluative language and emphasising a news actor's celebrity status is associated with newsworthiness (Harper & Hogue, 2015; Popovic, 2018). Besides, the emphasis on the Actor indicates agency as a survivor instead of a victim. A survivor's identity comprises victimisation and agency (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). This suggests that the emphasis of her occupation as a public figure bore her the responsibility and means to indict her harasser. Furthermore, the perpetrator was referred to his parental relationship with the victim and a generalised description of his crime. Abbas and Talaat (2019) ratify this finding as the use of 'father' implies the emotional aspect of the relationship between the parties. Hence, this approach may evoke sympathy in readers on the reported case.

Table 7
The Star: Material process

Excerpt 3: Child murder suspect's kids confirm there was abuse, say Johor cops | The Star | 4 October 2022

Police	then arrested	a 28-year-old salesman, who has priors and a 40-year-old Indonesian maid	on Monday (Oct 3) afternoon
Actor	Pr: Material	Goal	Circ: Place

This excerpt is in active voice whereby the 'Police' is identified as the Actor, while 'a 28-year-old salesman, who has priors' and 'a 40-year-old Indonesian maid' were identified as the Goal. The Material process is encoded in the verb 'arrested.' It can be determined that the arrested offenders involved in the event are represented by their age and roles. Firstly, representing the actor as a salesman foregrounds his penurious financial condition. Adding his previous criminal conviction to the clause also coincides with the notion that his financial issues might be the driving force behind his abuse. Similarly, Abbas and Talaat (2019) find that news shifts the responsibility of the crime onto the perpetrator's financial status instead of the perpetrator. Additionally, the other participant in the Goal is attributed to her age, race, and occupation. Interestingly, the newspaper did not address her background or her role in the crime. This may increase a stereotype of migrants or foreigners and seemingly predictive behaviour of a person with priors among the readers. Karpenko-Seccombe et al. (2022) assert

that news tends to categorise people according to their social class and occupations rather than individuals. Hence, it can be inferred that the offence was attributed to the backgrounds of the perpetrators rather than their actions.

Mental Process

Table 8
Free Malaysia Today: Mental process

Excerpt 6: 1 in 10 children likely to be victim of abuse | July 16, 2021

He	suspected	that the actual figures were higher since many sexual abuse incidences were under-reported.
Senser	**Pr: mental**	**Phenomenon**

The transitivity analysis indicates this excerpt contains a Mental process underlying the verb "suspected." Suriana Welfare Society chairman James Nayagam is identified as the Senser while his impression on the underreported cases of child abuse is determined as the Phenomenon. Prior to this excerpt, the news reports on the women, family, and community development ministry recorded 2,040 child abuse cases with nearly 30% of the statistical data being physical and sexual abuse in the first four months of the year 2021. The evidence that may support his suspicion of the underreporting of child abuse cases is noticeably absent in the news report. Nevertheless, his status as the leader of an established activist group may influence the readers and potentially arouse suspicion as well. As observed, the victims of child abuse cases referred to in the excerpt were represented by quantity. Reflecting Karpenko-Seccombe et al. (2022), the lexical items including 'actual figures' and 'many sexual abuse incidences' represent child victims as depersonalised entities. This reduced the victims into numerical figures and further propagate the representation of victims as silent sufferers of victimisation (Kitzinger, 2015). This approach in portraying crime in a neutral and generalised way may desensitise news readers to immoral behaviour.

Table 9
The Star: Mental process

Excerpt 7: Minister slammed for belittling child actress - January 11, 2019

He	felt	that the actress *had found an avenue to talk about her abuse* and was *brave* enough to do it
Senser	**Pr: mental**	**Phenomenon**

This excerpt is in active voice whereby the 'He' is identified as the Senser, while the event is determined as the Phenomenon. The excerpt reports Suriana Welfare Society chairman James Nayagam's justifying the actions undertaken by the victim. Against the backdrop of face-saving norms in Malaysia, his perception may be influenced by the difficulties victims of child abuse face when attempting to expose criminal acts perpetrated against them. By citing 'found an avenue' and describing her bravery, it can be said that the excerpt is framed

positively. This description follows the preposition suggested by Prout and James (2015) for children to be described as 'social actors' who can exercise active agency rather than simply being the object of actions by others. However, it can also be argued that the victim is silenced and was simply described by the retellings of an official. Kitzinger (2015) asserts that victims of child abuse are rarely represented by journalists. They are represented as the 'silent sufferer' and remain faceless and inaudible.

Relational process

Table 10
The Star: Relational process

Excerpt 9: Suspect in abused kid's death has a record of eight previous offences, say cops | 12 October 2022

The man	who allegedly murdered his three-month-old baby boy	has	a criminal record of eight previous crimes, including for drugs.
Carrier	**Attribute**	**Pr: Rel**	**Attribute**

The excerpt displays a Relational-Attributive process underlying the verb "has." The *Carrier* is identified as 'the man' and his *Attributes* are emphasised in the first half and the latter part of the clause. The gender of the perpetrator is highlighted, which lacks the semantic equivalence the word 'murderer' has (Abbas and Talaat, 2019). This removes the focus on the abuse instead shifting it to the identity of the doer. Furthermore, the perpetrator's priors were foregrounded which may reinforce the impression of him being guilty of the crime. Harper and Hogue (2014) assert that newspapers distinguish the 'law-abiding majority' and perpetrators by considering explicit and abnormal facets of the perpetrators' personalities and experiences. This reinforces the idea that an individual with illegal conduct is distinguishable due to their association with other crimes, instead of a heterogeneous group with diverse backgrounds and personalities. In other words, a person who instigates abuse may not have any priors. Davies et al (2015) suggest that it may be easier to shift the responsibility solely on one 'immoral' perpetrator instead of framing it as an epidemiological issue that can be addressed systematically. Thus, the newspaper emphasises the identity of the alleged murderer rather than his association with the act of murder itself.

Table 11
Free Malaysia Today: Relational process

Excerpt 12: Mother, lover remanded for alleged abuse of her son **|** 5 December 2021

The body	was not	intact;
the legs and organs	were	missing.
The gender and race of the child	are	still unknown.
Token	**Identifying: Possessive**	**Value**

The transitivity analysis of this excerpt divulges a Relational Process, 'was not,' 'were,' and 'are,' which projects Identifying mode and Possessive type. The Token is identified as 'the body,' 'the legs and organs,' and 'the gender and race of the child.' Meanwhile, 'intact,' 'missing,' and 'still unknown' represent Values. The excerpts provide a dehumanised representation of the deceased victim's body and unknown identity. The victim is represented as a causality of a crime rather than a person with rights and dignity. This excerpt demonstrates how news reports abominable accounts of child abuse due to the possibility of attracting readership (Hove et al., 2013; Popovic, 2018). Thus, supplying incongruous details of the crime is motivated by the desire to gain readers' recognition rather than giving a victim a voice (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). Thus, this dehumanised portrayal of the victim may desensitise readers to the cases of child abuse.

Verbal Process

Table 12
The Star: Verbal process

Excerpt 14: Child abuse: 37 out of 88 cases reported in Melaka involve sexual abuse, says exco	2 October 2022		
"This shows an unhealthy development trend, especially involving this group since exposure to child pornography leads to sex addiction which can bring harm and that leads to other sexual issues,"	she	said.
Verbiage	**Sayer**	**Pr: Verbal**

The transitivity process identified in this excerpt is the Verbal process. The Sayer is determined as the previous State Women's Affairs, Family Development and Welfare Committee chairman Datuk Kalsom Nordin. Direct quote was employed to increase the objectivity and persuasiveness of the reports made by authorities (Cen and Wu, 2014). The Sayer pinpoints the issue of the widespread distribution of child exploitation material online. Employing 'this group' in reference to the perpetrators creates a proximal relationship symbolising that they exist amidst society. It discards the potential of the perpetrators being anonymous, indicating that any individual has the possibility of becoming an offender (Harper & Hogue, 2014). It is implicit that the Sayer is not directly addressing the perpetrators, instead, she is placing the responsibility onto the parents and caregivers. By emphasising the potential harm, she is inciting apprehension and underscoring the public to monitor their wards' online activities (Child abuse: 37 out of 88 cases reported in Melaka involve sexual abuse, says exco, 2022). Ho and Chan (2018) reveal that news is inclined to suggest to readers that maltreatment incidents are solely associated with individual behaviour and can only be alleviated by individuals. This approach implicitly and occasionally explicitly includes victim-blaming messages which are evident in this excerpt. Consequently, Hove et al. (2013) suggest that detaching the abuse from its societal roots and causes leads to diminished possibilities for policy resolutions and preventive measures.

Table 13
Free Malaysia Today: Verbal process

Excerpt 15: Stop silencing survivors of child abuse, group tells minister | 9 September 2022

The Joint Action has Group (JAG) for condemned Gender Equality	religious affairs minister Idris Ahmad	for trying to silence a teenage actress who alleged that she was molested by her father when younger.
Sayer	**Pr: Verbal**	**Target**	**Circ: Matter**

The transitivity process underlying the verb "has condemned" identified in the excerpt is the Verbal process. The Sayer is identified as The Joint Action Group (JAG) for Gender Equality and the religious affairs minister Idris Ahmad acts as the Target. Firstly, the author indubitably emphasised the negative impression of the Target by employing 'has condemned.' This excerpt provides a more explicit visual compared to The Star's journalism in excerpt 8. For instance, 'molested' is used in lieu of 'sexual harassment,' which inevitably provides an impactful visual to the readers. In their findings, Talaat and Abbas (2019) reveal that employing a term that does not have the same semantic equivalence result in the emotional exploitation of the readers. Further, the name of the religious affairs minister is included in this excerpt while noticeably absent in The Star's article. This transposes the attention from the victim's experiences to the minister's misconduct and leaves the actual perpetrator with less coverage. This may be attributed to the journalists' inclination to capture the reader's attention as opposed to providing the victim with a voice (Karpenko-Seccombe et al., 2022). Placing the focus on the impropriety of the minister thus suggests the journalists acting on their societal duty in putting the limelight on authoritative figures as the dominant wielders of power. Therefore, this approach of disputing the minister may aggravate the readers more than the incident of child sexual abuse itself.

Existential Process

Table 14
The Star: Existential process

Excerpt 18: Ministry for children's affairs? | 30 December 2022

"There have been	lots of programmes, seminars on child abuse, conferences on sexual abuse and many others, but all these are not quite effective in bringing down the number of cases.
Subject	**Pr: Existential**	**Pt: Existent**

Next, this excerpt also showcases an Existential process materialising in the verb phrase "has been." Suriana Welfare Society chairman Dr James Nayagam recognised that the government has conducted many programmes in creating awareness of child abuse. However, these efforts were considered to be ineffective as the statistics of reported cases continue to increase. Similar to Karpenko-Seccombe et al (2022), child victims in this excerpt were

represented by quantity as observed in 'the number of cases.' In contrast to the previous excerpt, Dr James Nayagam's statement is directly quoted which indicates objectivity (Qin, 2018). However, it can also be interpreted that the author's attentive attitude towards reporting criticism of the government. It can be inferred that the platform's affiliation with the government may affect the author's reporting strategy. As observed in the article, the author included the positive reaction of Roland Edward. In contrast to Dr James Nayagam, the engagement and operations director of Be My Protector commended the government's idea of establishing a special department for the welfare of children. These differences in perspectives will indubitably encourage the readers to construct their viewpoints on the matter.

Table 15
Free Malaysia Today: Existential process

Excerpt 19: Employ only experienced welfare workers, govt told	6 January 2023		
"There are	many children who are failed by the system and society at large."	
Subject	**Pr: Existential**	**Pt: Existent**

The excerpt discloses an existential process realised in the verb "is." The statement was delivered by a group of 25 signatories including Dr Amar-Singh HSS, Dr Hartini Zainudin and Dr Farah Nini Dusuki. In this case, the author had directly quoted the statement to emphasise objectivity. The use of the determiner 'many' and the verb 'failed' may indicate the negative tone of the statement. 'Many' are typically used in negative sentences or more formal English to represent a large number of entities (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2022). This indicates that the activist group is imploring the government to properly mitigate and protect the rights of children. This is similar to Karpenko-Seccombe et al (2022) who assert that news tends to represent child victims in a quantitative manner which may depersonalise child victims. Additionally, it can be inferred that the author reflects the sentiment as observed in their decision to provide a direct quotation (Cen and Wu, 2014). The journalist fully reports on the statements and concerns of the activists toward the issues and government. Thus, this contrasts excerpt 18 from The Star which provides two different perspectives from different non-government organisations.

Modalisation process of probability
The likelihood of the information being exchanged being true is realised in the probability process (Rui & Jingxia, 2018). It materialised through modals including 'can,' 'could,' 'will,' 'would,' 'might,' and 'may.' They can be further categorised into three different degrees of modality which are low, median, and high.

The Star
1. "*No* amount of reputation laundering *can* erase the trauma experienced by any victim, especially a child victim of sexual violence or harassment, or the consequence of being called a liar when it matters most." - *Stop victim-blaming, don't silence voices of sexual abuse victims, says Azalina*

The excerpt reveals a declarative sentence indirectly adjuring the previous Minister of Religious Affairs, Idris Ahmad. Azalina Othman Said is indirectly reprimanding Idris Ahmad for his attempt in silencing the victim of child sexual abuse (CSA). She is presumably stating that while his reputation as an authoritative figure equips him with the power to conceal his faults, his words will inevitably affect victims of CSA. This further allows the cycle of victim-blaming and underreporting of child abuse cases to persist. The modality expression discovered in the excerpt is 'can.' While Halliday considers 'can' as a low degree of modality, Kristianti (2021) asserts that the level of certainty of the speaker must be determined by analysing the context behind the assertation. In this case, the determiner 'no' reveals a high certainty and absence of negation. News writers' attitudes are indirectly shown by modal expressions with explicit objective orientation (Zhai & Jingxia, 2018). The deliberate use of a direct quote indicates the writer's refusal to shoulder responsibility but merely just stating a fact. Further, direct speech manipulates the message into a more personalised and engaging one (Eerland et al., 2018). In this excerpt, the use of 'reputation laundering' and 'liar' undeniably signals the infuriation of the speaker. This emotionally-charged language may postulate a corrective thinking style in readers (Harper & Hogue, 2015). Thus, it can be inferred that the speaker is reprimanding the minister without directly addressing him.

Free Malaysia Today

2. "When we have sketchy reports and the case goes to trial, that *will be the end of it.* The perpetrator *will* go out smiling. *Nothing can be done* because those reports are very important, especially when the victim is *no longer around*." - *Child abuse: Strong medical reports help convict offenders, says paediatrician* | 11 January 2019

The modal auxiliary 'will' indicates a median-level degree of probability. However, the statement and context indicate the speaker's certainty of the instance happening. This can be observed in 'that will be the end of it' and 'nothing can be done.' This hints at the author's attitude in stressing the need for medical practitioners in preparing comprehensive and explicit medical reports for child abuse victims. The use of 'will' in conditional clauses emphasises the certainty of a phenomenon occurring (Kristianti, 2021). It can also be inferred that the modal auxiliary is employed to ensure the news is compelling and objective. Zhai and Jingxia (2018) affirm this notion as it is impossible for news discourse to be fully objective despite readers' expectations. Thus, using modal verbs may increase readers' confidence in the truthfulness of a news piece. In this case, the speaker is using a hypothetical situation, presumably constructed by her experience as an expert, to emphasise the need for efficiently written medical reports of child abuse. Furthermore, the victim in this excerpt is depicted as a silent entity and a casualty of an offence. This parallels Furedi (2013); McAlinden (2014) whereby the news tends to emphasise the vulnerability of victims without considering their voices. This further propagates the idea of child abuse victims as silent sufferers of misconduct.

Modalisation Process of Usuality
The modality which reveals the frequency of events is usuality. It can be interpreted as the frequency of an occurrence. It materialises in adverbs that act as mood adjuncts of modality including 'usually,' 'always,' 'never,' and 'sometimes.'

The Star

3. "The Social Welfare Department is *always* ready to provide immediate support to abuse victims both its standard operating procedure (SOP)…," she said in a reply to Kumaresan Arumugam (PKR-Batu Uban) yesterday. - *More than 200 cases of child abuse in Penang* | 29 November 2022

The modal adjunct "always" displayed in the excerpt has a high degree of modalisation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The excerpt showcases the social development and non-Muslim affairs committee chairman, Chong Eng's response to inquiries concerning the causes and mitigation strategies of child abuse cases. The speaker is prepositioning that the Social Welfare Department is consistent in its assistance toward providing support to abuse victims as observed in the provided timeframe. Addressing their commitment to following the SOP also supports her perception of the efficiency of the department in handling cases. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) assert that the degrees of usuality are linked with the frequencies of events occurring in the present, past, and future. Similar to Farhat (2016), the speaker is not attempting to persuade or offer the readers to act on something, but merely stating their dedication to provide support for relevant parties. Thus, the department is assuring the minister and the public of their reliability in managing abuse complaints and cases. However, it is also observed that the news article only reported on the speaker's assertations while discarding the questions delivered by Kumaresan. In this case, the readers would not know the context of the question the speaker is referring to. Amer (2017) affirms this as media discourse only displays a 'one-sided' perspective that has an acutely distinguished separation between producers and interpreters.

Free Malaysia Today

4. "We cannot just rely on the parents' story… The parents *usually* say everything is okay, and so the abuse still goes on *if* we only talk to the parents," she said. - *Incest, abuse happens when parents treat children as property, says expert* | 13 January 2019

The modal adjunct "usually" presented in the conditional clause indicates a median degree of usuality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The speaker, Dr Irene Cheah Guat Sim, is asserting that there is a high frequency of cases where parents deny abuse when the police or welfare authorities visit their residences after receiving a report. She is asserting that merely asking potential perpetrators about their suspected abuse would not expose the real event and ultimately cause the truth to remain concealed. This shows the importance of appraising and examining child victims. Using 'a lot of times' and 'as to how things are' when describing indicates the speaker's certainty in her statement. Gho and Pasaribu (2021) support this notion as one's careful selection of modalities shows their belief in the degree of the event they are describing. Hence, the speaker is not merely prepositioning but asking officials to investigate potential abuse cases. This is supported by Ali et al (2017) who assert that the use of the exclusive pronoun 'we' denotes the author's desire for the readers for their allegiance in contributing to a clause. Kang (2020) expands this notion as the use of pronouns in a speech may create or reduce the distance between the speaker and the audience. In this case, the pronoun 'we' decreases the distance thus signalling unity and solidarity.

Modulation Process of Obligation

The type of modality that carries out a command or demand is an obligation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It appears in modals including 'must,' 'has/have to,' 'need to,' and 'ought to.' The obligation type of modality comprises the responsibility and the demand of the speaker to the hearer.

The Star

5. Child activist Datuk Dr Hartini Zainuddin said it was *"ridiculous"* that the statement came from a religious minister and that Idris *ought to* understand that the child's needs and protection are paramount in cases of sexual abuse. - *Minister slammed for belittling child actress* | 9 September 2022

The excerpt reveals a declarative and jussive statement released by Datuk Dr Hartini Zainuddin criticising the previous Minister of Religious Affairs, Idris Ahmad, for his remarks against a victim of child sexual abuse. Firstly, the quoted 'ridiculous' indicates the author's emphasis on the attitude of the speaker. Furthermore, the modal 'ought to' has a high degree of modality and indicates a sense of duty typically employed when criticising someone's action. According to Yu and Wu (2016), the values of modulation reflect the strength of the modal assessment. The power assumed by the speaker on themself over the hearer is determined by the value and strength of the command. Datuk Dr Hartini Zainuddin is a prominent activist with decades of experience dedicated to the welfare of marginalised children (Tatler Asia, 2021). Understanding her background as an activist allows readers to understand the weight and credibility of her statement. The clause 'the statement came from a religious minister' also indicates her disappointment toward his background and his ignorance in protecting vulnerable children. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) assert that modulation represents the speakers' attitudes in proposals. Similarly, Fontaine (2013) asserts that modulation refers to a type of connotative meaning related to obligation or permission, including willingness and ability. Hence, it can be inferred that the speaker is demanding the minister to provide better support to child abuse victims.

Free Malaysia Today

6. "You *must* also remember that sexual abuse to a young child is a powerful thing. It is not all sexual. Why do they molest toddlers who are 1, 2 or 3 years old? It is because he feels he has the power. After all, the child cannot say no. - Incest, abuse happens when parents treat children as property, says expert | 13 January 2019

The modal 'must' reveals the demand of Dr Irene Cheah Guat Sim, the Head of the Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) team in Kuala Lumpur Hospital (HKL), for the public to understand the power imbalance between adults and children. In this excerpt, the speaker utilised the pronoun 'you' to directly address the audience. Similar to Karpenko-Seccombe et al.'s (2022) findings, the identity of the addressee in this excerpt is found to be ambiguous. Furthermore, the statement is written in an explicit and negative manner as observed in the lexical item 'molest.' The use of the modal expression 'must' combined with a rhetorical question in this excerpt implies the speaker's persuasive attitude. This is supported by Zhai and Jingxia (2018) who claim that 'must' has a high value of modality. This finding also reveals that the speaker employed a hypothetical case of child abuse to support her desire to end the

immoral treatment of children. This finding is similar to Karpenko-Seccombe et al (2022) whereby news rarely allows victims to use their own voices in describing their experiences and feelings. They are more likely to use the retellings of officials.

Modulation Process of Inclination

The type of modality that concerns the act of offering is inclination and can be expressed through willingness, determination, and commitment (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The Star

7. "**We** urge the Women, Family and Community Development Minister to expedite the Social Work Profession Bill through Parliament. This **will** enable the government to recruit the people with the right qualifications to become welfare officers." - Deaths of children due to abuse must be addressed, says group | 6 January 2023

The modal 'will' reveals a median level of inclination. The use of 'urge' however indicates the high level of persistence in persuading the government, especially the Women, Family, and Community Development Department to improve the quality and competence of welfare officers. This finding parallels Kristianti (2021) who emphasises the confidence of the speaker. Farhat (2016) claims that modulation concerns the speakers' offers of services and goods. It can be inferred that the speaker is proposing a bill for the betterment of the government. Following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the clause is determined as a proposal whereby it concerns the government's inclination to implement the bill. In this case, the speaker is confident that the bill will improve the quality and efficiency of the welfare department. Furthermore, it may be beneficial for all parties involved including the mitigation of child abuse cases. Another observation is the exclusive pronoun 'we' occupying the subject of the clause signifying the activists involved in the article. This lexical item combined with the use of direct quotation also increases the persuasiveness of the statement. This parallels Ali et al. (2017) who claim that this finding indicates the speaker assumes authority and power to mandate better regulatory measures in recruiting welfare officers.

Free Malaysia Today

8. The code, which includes a code of conduct, will be used to handle complaints about sexual harassment at all levels, including sports training centres, before being replaced by the Safe Sports Act. - *Hold accountable enablers of coach who slapped players, says group* | 12 January 2023

The modal 'will' demonstrates a median level of inclination. The context of the article reveals the dismissal of a coach guiding the Melaka team in the Under-14 Youth Volleyball Championship in Johor. The statement reveals the government's commitment to implementing the Safe Sport Code to protect athletes from any form of exploitation. The analysis reveals that the journalist placed the responsibility for handling complaints regarding sexual harassment on the code itself, instead of the officials. The omission of the actor is attributed to the actor being an unknown entity or identified according to the context (Abbas & Talaat, 2019). Furthermore, asserting a potentially more comprehensive bill in the statement, 'Safe Sports Act,' further indicates the keenness of the government to provide a better approach to mitigating child abuse cases. This parallels the findings of Farhat (2016),

whereby the use of 'will' as a median inclination device represents the speaker's desire for the addressee to accept and anticipate their future intents. Hence, it can be said that the journalist has a positive attitude toward the future implementation of the bills which may influence the readers' perception of the matter.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the area of linguistics by analysing news discourse on child abuse. It utilised Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to cover the limited research on the aforementioned theoretical framework on news discourse on child abuse. The data collected for this study comprises twenty-eight news articles published by The Star and Free Malaysia Today news platforms. The research instrument for this paper includes the transitivity and modality processes described by (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Further, the data were analysed following Karpenko-Seccombe et al.'s (2022) method of analysing the representations of child abuse victims and perpetrators. The findings of this study first revealed that the portrayal of victims and perpetrators may distort the readers' perceptions of the events. The victims are represented in a collectivist and generalised manner, commonly depicted by statistical data and age. This approach encourages victims to be portrayed as invisible and depersonalised entities. In contrast, the journalists constructed detailed descriptions of the perpetrators and the crimes committed. It can be inferred that this approach increases newsworthiness and the details of the crime would evoke an emotional response in readers. Furthermore, both The Star and Free Malaysia Today employ different transitivity processes indicating the roles and attitudes of the journalists in presenting the news. However, the latter's tendency to use emotive and evaluative language in their reports will inevitably elicit a response from the audience thus increasing the newsworthiness of their articles. In contrast, the disposition of The Star to employ seemingly neutral language signals their attentiveness in describing the events while managing their affiliation with the government. Next, the modality analysis reveals both The Star and Free Malaysia Today employed modalisation and modulation techniques in their reporting. A salient finding is that the journalists employ direct quotations for all of the modality processes, excluding the modulation process of obligation. Indirect quotations prompt the assumption that the message has been manipulated or reflected by the journalist. This shows that the journalists also stress the importance and severity of the requests. Thus, this study may benefit language students, journalists, and future research on news discourse.

Recommendations for Future research

Future studies may compare news articles from the previous decade and current times to showcase the difference in the language of reporting child abuse cases. Then, this study utilised the qualitative research methodology which closely analyse the collected textual data. This delimits the analysis to a perspective-based approach and has no statistical representation. Future research may use a mixed-method approach, such as employing a survey on the perspectives of the readers, for cross-referential purposes. This allows a more reliable and valid analysis of the findings. Next, the sample of this study is 28 news articles published on two Malaysian English-language news platforms The Star and Free Malaysia Today. The reports were observed to have a reliance on the statements released by authoritative figures. Future research may analyse different registers including letters to the authors or opinion pieces published on news platforms, press releases, and social media posts as the language utilised in these registers may illicit different findings. Further, the findings of

the present study are dependent on the researcher's interpretations and understanding of reality. Hence, future research has the potential to attain similar or dissimilar results that will prove a wider perspective of the issues discussed.

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