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# Critical Discourse Analysis of Drink-Driving Representation in Malaysian Media: A Socio-Semiotic Approach

Nor Izzati binti Md Jaafar<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Language Department, Centre for Languages and Foundation Studies, Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah, Kuala Kangsar, Perak, Malaysia

<sup>1</sup>Email: izzati.jaafar@usas.edu.my

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**Abstract.** Malaysia has always been on a general upward trend when it comes to the drink-driving issue, with the increasing number of accidents sparking tensions among Malaysians and calling for a revisit to existing laws. In championing tougher law enforcement against offenders, the public has somewhat created a social distance between themselves and drunk drivers, highlighting an unequal flow of power between the majority and the minority of drunk-driving motorists. To investigate how this dynamic is communicated, this study examines how drink-driving is represented in The Star newspaper articles, analysing the discursive construction of victims, perpetrators, and authorities through van Leeuwen's socio-semiotic framework and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach. Data comprising six newspaper articles revealed consistent framing patterns where perpetrators are individualised (18 instances) yet negatively predicated, victims are humanised but passivated (26 instances), and authorities are activated (32 instances) as legitimate enforcers. Referential strategies employing "us versus them" dichotomies, argumentative topoi of numbers and justice, and predication strategies (representing 28.1% of discursive strategies) collectively marginalise drunk drivers while legitimising punitive responses. This study proposes amended legislation with mandatory alcohol education programs, enhanced public awareness campaigns, and improved alternative transport infrastructure as multifaceted solutions. The findings contribute to understanding how media discourse shapes public perception surrounding drink-driving in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** *Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse-Historical Approach; drink-driving; Malaysian media; The Star newspaper*

**Abbreviations:** CDA = Critical Discourse Analysis; DHA = Discourse-Historical Approach; DUI = driving under the influence.

## INTRODUCTION

Drink-driving has emerged as one of the most pressing public safety and legal issue in Malaysia that has received sustained attention in news reporting, particularly when alcohol-impaired driving is associated with injury, death, arrests, or court proceedings. Following high-profile fatal collisions, the Malaysian government enacted the Road Transport (Amendment) Act 2020 (Act A1618), amending the Road Transport Act 1987 (Act 333)<sup>1</sup>. This legislative overhaul significantly reduced permissible blood, breath, and urine alcohol concentration limits such as prescribed alcohol limits, including 22 microgrammes of alcohol per 100 millilitres of breath, 50 milligrammes per 100 millilitres of blood, and 67 milligrammes per 100 millilitres of urine [1] while markedly escalating mandatory custodial sentences and monetary fines.

Print media plays an essential role in recontextualizing these legal shifts and framing social responsibility for the public. Crime-news research in Malaysia has shown that newspapers select, prioritise, and frame information in ways that can shape the visibility and perceived significance of crime [2]. The framing of messages in media involves representations of perpetrators, victims, police, courts, government officials, and the public.

As Malaysia's premier English-language daily newspaper, The Star functions as a primary venue for shaping civic discourse, constructing crime narratives, and establishing moral stances regarding impaired driving. Media discourse does not merely report objective facts. It selectively prioritizes sources, employs evaluative language, and builds narrative structures that assign agency, victimhood, and institutional legitimacy. Previous scholarly research on Malaysian media framing has highlighted how crime reporting constructs in-groups and out-groups, often favoring state authorities as primary sources while marginalizing offender perspectives [2]. Furthermore, international studies on alcohol harm reduction emphasize that news media frequently oscillate between punitive deterrence narratives and public health education frames [3]. However, a significant research gap exists regarding how contemporary print media discursively constructs alcohol-impaired driving under Malaysia's amended legal framework. Existing literature lacks a systematic,

dual-framework analysis combining socio-semiotic social actor categories with discourse-historical strategies.

Addressing this research gap is significant for understanding how media message dissemination influences public safety education, legal literacy, and policy expectations. By critically examining news texts, researchers, educators, and policymakers can evaluate whether media dissemination promotes comprehensive public safety awareness or reinforces purely retributive social distance.

The purpose of this research is to critically analyze media message dissemination on alcohol-impaired driving in 6 The Star newspapers. This study therefore combines van Leeuwen's social actor framework with Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach. Van Leeuwen's framework provides tools for examining how people and institutions are included, excluded, individuated, collectivised, activated, or passivated in discourse [4]. DHA complements this analysis by examining nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivation, and intensification or mitigation, while placing discourse in its historical and socio-political context [5]. The study addresses three research questions:

1. How are the social actors represented through van Leeuwen's socio-semantic categories?
2. Which DHA discursive strategies are used to construct responsibility, risk, legitimacy, and moral positioning?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Critical Discourse Analysis and Crime Reporting

CDA treats discourse as socially situated rather than as a neutral container of information. Its concern with power, ideology, and representation makes it suitable for examining how institutional voices become authoritative and how particular identities are normalised through language [6]. In news discourse, the selection of sources, lexical labels, quotations, headlines, and narrative sequencing can influence which actors are foregrounded and which perspectives remain peripheral.

A Malaysian study of crime news examined 458 reports from four newspapers and found differences in the frequency, placement, visual presentation, and sourcing of crime stories. The study reported that The Star accounted for 88 of the 458 articles in its sampled period and argued that news construction involves selective prioritisation and framing [2]. The study scrutinised how crime information is discursively constructed within newspapers.

Research on alcohol-related crime news in another media context likewise shows that news coverage can combine information, awareness, and fear-oriented framing [7]. These empirical insights hold significant implications for drink-driving research, as narratives concerning accidents, injuries, arrests, and penalties seamlessly lead to the framing of perceptions.

### Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework

Van Leeuwen's framework examines how social actors are represented through inclusion and exclusion and through categories such as individualisation, assimilation, nomination, categorisation, functionalisation, identification, activation, and passivation [4]. These linguistic choices carry significant weight, as identical occurrences can construct different social meanings depending on whether an actor is named, described by occupation, grouped with others, represented as acting, or represented as receiving an action.

In media reports concerning drink-driving, for instance, a law enforcement officer might be institutionalized with a full name and official title, functioning syntactically as the grammatical subject of verbs such as 'said', 'arrested', or 'reported'. Conversely, a motorist is frequently delineated through parameters such as age, occupation, intoxication status, charge, or conviction whereas, a victim is commonly framed via age, occupation, sustained trauma, or fatality.

Although such textual patterning does not inherently substantiate deliberate ideological manipulation, it furnishes vital empirical evidence for investigating how agency and social identity are systematically distributed across discourse.

### Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach

DHA examines discourse through several interrelated strategies. Nomination concerns how social actors and events are named; predication concerns the qualities or characteristics attributed to actors; perspectivation concerns the positioning of viewpoints; argumentation concerns the topoi or warrants used to justify claims; and intensification or mitigation concerns the strengthening or softening of propositions [6]. Historical and contextual information is incorporated to avoid treating textual features as isolated linguistic phenomena. Combining van Leeuwen with DHA is useful because both supports a more systematic analysis of the relationship between actor representation and discursive legitimation.

## METHODS

### Research Design

This descriptive study used content analysis to examine newspaper articles on drink-driving. Content analysis was appropriate as the focus was on identifying the representation of social actors and strategy constructs in the articles. A total of 6 online The Star newspapers were employed in this study. The sampling strategy was purposive. Preference was given to reports on drink-driving. Articles were identified using the keywords “drink-driving”, “drunk” and “casualties”.

### Procedures

To comprehensively examine the portrayal of drink-driving within the selected articles from *The Star*, it is essential to scrutinize how social actors are represented. Van Leeuwen's 2008 framework was used to look at the representation of actors within the media discourse. Each article was read for social-actor representation using van Leeuwen's categories, with particular attention to individualisation, nomination, categorisation, functionalisation, identification, activation, and passivation. Figure 1 shows the elements of social actors.

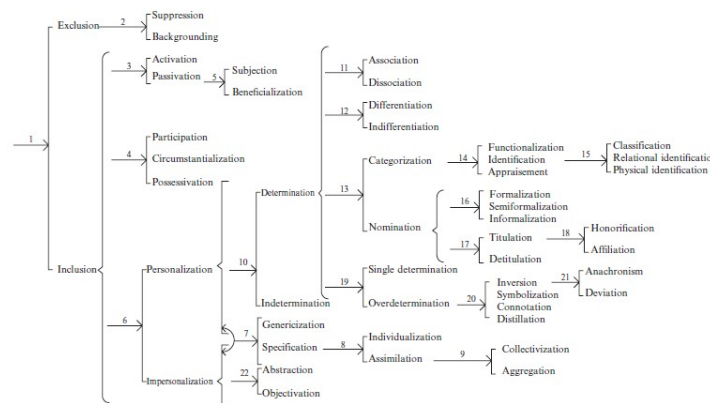


Figure 1. Social actor by Van Leeuwen (2008).

Second, the reports were analysed employing DHA strategies: nomination, predication, perspectivation, argumentation, and intensification/mitigation. Third, longitudinal patterns were systematically compared across the six publication years, with particular attention directed towards legal context, enforcement discourse, and the movement from individual incident reporting to national statistical reporting.

Table 1. Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) strategies by Wodak (2001).

| Strategies                    | Objectives                                                 |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nomination                    | Construction of in-groups and out-groups                   |
| Predication                   | Labelling social actors positively/negatively              |
| Argumentation                 | Justification of positive/negative attributes              |
| Perspectivation               | Expressing involvement positioning speaker's point of view |
| Intensification or mitigation | Modifying the epistemic status of a proposition            |

To address the second research question concerning discursive strategies, the analytical steps of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) outlined by Wodak (2001) were adopted. Table 1 shows the strategies available to reveal the representation of the marginalised and the one with power.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Representation of Social Actors

The analysis revealed a stable discursive pattern across all six articles, with consistent representation of perpetrators, victims, authorities, and the public. Table 2 summarises the frequency of inclusion and exclusion strategies for each social actor category.

Table 2. Frequency of social actor representation strategies

| Social Actor | Individualisation | Functionalisation | Identification | Activation | Passivation | Suppression |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Perpetrators | 18                | 12                | 15             | 8          | 22          | 5           |
| Victims      | 14                | 9                 | 16             | 4          | 26          | 3           |
| Authorities  | 24                | 20                | 11             | 32         | 6           | 2           |
| Public       | 6                 | 4                 | 8              | 10         | 12          | 9           |

(18 instances) of individualisation from the 6 newspaper articles as shown in Table 2 revealed that perpetrators are frequently individualised. Data showed that the perpetrators were individualised through personal naming and occupational labelling, but these forms of inclusion are accompanied by negative predication and frequent passivation. For example, in the November 2024 article, offenders are described as "a 34-year-old man under the influence of alcohol", "a 28-year-old man who was drunk driving", and "a 23-

year-old graduate charged with driving under the influence of alcohol". These identifiers individualise the actors through age and, in one case, educational status "graduate", yet these forms of identification are overshadowed by references to drink-driving, legal charges, and harm caused.

This pattern exemplifies individualisation combined with functionalisation, where the actor is identified as a concrete person but also inserted into a socially readable role that supports judgement. The label "graduate" in particular carries ideological weight, suggesting that even educated individuals engage in drink-driving, thereby universalising the threat and reinforcing the need for stringent enforcement.

However, perpetrators are also frequently passivated syntactically. They are described as "charged", "arrested", "caught", or "convicted", positioning them as recipients of legal action rather than agents with voice or perspective. In only two instances across six articles were perpetrators quoted directly, and even then, their statements were framed within the context of legal proceedings rather than personal explanation or mitigation.

Suppression of perpetrators occurs in five instances, where clauses describe actions or consequences without specifying the actor. For example, "two were killed after their motorcycle was run over by a vehicle" where the perpetrator was omitted entirely, focusing instead on the victims and the harm caused. This suppression reinforces the moral asymmetry by rendering the offender invisible while foregrounding victim suffering.

Table 2 showed that victims are mostly passivated in the six articles. Data showed that victims are represented differently from perpetrators, with a distinct pattern of humanisation combined with passivation. They are usually named and age-marked, which humanises them, but they are also passivated syntactically such as they are "killed", "injured", "run over", or described as ones who "suffered grievous injury".

This representation creates sympathy while preserving a structural silence around victim agency. Victims' presence in the texts depends on harm done to them, not on their own speech or perspective. None of the six articles included victims or their families quote directly, despite the emotional impact of their losses. This absence contrasts sharply with the extensive quotations from authorities, whose statements dominate the discourse.

Identification strategies are prominent for victims, with (16 instances) of age-marking such as "11-year-old", "28-year-old" and "college students" along with nine instances of functionalisation for instance, "student" and "motorcyclist". These identifiers humanise victims and render them relatable to readers, reinforcing the moral urgency of the reporting. However, this humanisation is coupled with passivation (26 instances), positioning victims as recipients of harm rather than agents with voice or perspective.

Authorities, by contrast, are strongly activated and individualised with an accumulated number of occurrences (32) from the 6 articles. A number of authorities were incorporated in the articles with strong reporting verbs and action verbs such as Police officers "said", "urged", "revealed" and "arrested" or ministers "explained", "stated", and "announced" or magistrates "granted", "postponed", and "charged". These actors are also highly individualised through full names and titles, which lends their statements institutional weight reinforcing their authority and legitimacy. Activation is the dominant strategy for authorities. This pattern positions authorities as active, competent managers of social disorder, reinforcing the institutional authority of policing and the courts.

Functionalisation is also prominent for authorities (20 instances), with actors identified by their institutional roles ("police director", "Home Affairs Minister", "Traffic Investigation and Enforcement Department"). This functionalisation reinforces the legitimacy of state institutions, presenting them as organised, hierarchical, and accountable entities.

The public is represented more generically and relatively low in occurrences such as (6 instances) and (4 instances) in individualisation and functionalisation suggested civic participation but not equal discursive authority. The public is occasionally activated (10 instances), as in "We are most worried about law-abiding road users who could inadvertently become victims", where the collective "we" includes both authorities and the public in shared concern.

However, the public is also frequently passivated (12 instances) or suppressed (9 instances), positioned as potential victims or passive observers rather than active participants in discourse. This representation reinforces the us-versus-them framing, where the public aligns with authorities against the offender, yet lacks direct voice or agency in the narrative.

## Discursive Strategies

**Table 3. Frequency of discursive strategies**

| Strategy   | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------|-----------|----------------|
| Nomination | 45        | 24.3           |

| Strategy                   | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Predication                | 52        | 28.1           |
| Perspectivation            | 28        | 15.1           |
| Argumentation              | 48        | 26.0           |
| Intensification/Mitigation | 12        | 6.5            |
| Total                      | 185       | 100            |

### ***Predication***

Table 3 summarises the frequency of Wodak's five discursive strategies across the six articles. Predication strategies are the most frequent discursive strategy (52 instances, 28.1%), reflecting the heavy reliance on evaluative language to ascribe traits to social actors. Perpetrators are negatively predicated through adjectives and phrases such as "reckless", "irresponsible", "under the influence", "causing injury", and "charged with". These predicates construct the perpetrator as morally deficient and socially dangerous, justifying punitive responses.

For example, the phrase "a 28-year-old man who was drunk driving caused injury to an 11-year-old student" predicates the perpetrator with both the act (drunk driving) and the consequence (caused injury), creating a causal chain that assigns blame and moral responsibility. Similarly, "two were killed after their motorcycle was run over by a vehicle driven by a 34-year-old man under the influence of alcohol" predicates the perpetrator through the fatal outcome, reinforcing the severity of the offence.

Victims are positively or sympathetically predicated through terms such as "innocent", "killed", "injured", "student", and "college students". These predicates evoke sympathy and moral outrage, positioning victims as deserving of justice and protection. The repeated reference to victims' age and status ("11-year-old student", "college students") humanises them and amplifies the emotional impact of the reporting.

Authorities are positively predicated through terms such as "serious", "transparent", "fair", "intensified", and "reviewing". For instance, "police are responsible for carrying out traffic enforcement and conducting investigations with transparency and fairness to all parties involved" predicates the police as accountable and just, reinforcing their legitimacy. Similarly, "operations will be intensified to trace and stop such incidents" predicates the authorities as proactive and determined, positioning them as protectors of public safety.

### ***Argumentation***

Table 3 showed that argumentation strategies are the second most frequent (48 instances, 26.0%), reflecting the reliance on justifications and topoi to support claims. The dominant topoi include:

**Topoi of Numbers:** Statistical evidence is frequently cited to amplify the severity of drink-driving. For example, "A total of 149 cases of drunk driving car accidents have been charged in court from January 2021 to September 2024" and "120 fatal DUI accident cases recorded in the last four years" use numerical data to legitimise the seriousness of the issue. Similarly, "949 arrests of drivers under the influence of alcohol in the first six months of 2026 from 1,634 police operations" quantifies enforcement efforts, reinforcing the narrative of active policing.

**Topoi of Justice:** Legal references and penalties are cited to justify punitive responses. For instance, "Under Section 44, offenders of fatal drunk driving accidents can be imprisoned up to 15 years, with a minimum of 10 years behind bars, and a fine up to RM100,000" uses legal provisions to legitimise punishment. Similarly, "If the drunk driving accident has caused injury, convicted offenders can spend jail time up to 10 years, with a minimum of seven years, and a fine up to RM50,000" reinforces the legal consequences, creating a deterrent narrative.

**Topoi of Danger:** References to harm and risk are used to evoke fear and moral outrage. For example, "We are most worried about law-abiding road users who could inadvertently become victims" positions the public as vulnerable and the offender as a threat. Similarly, "two were killed", "caused injury", and "fatal accidents" repeatedly foreground the lethal consequences of drink-driving, amplifying the moral urgency.

**Topoi of Law and Rights:** Legal frameworks and enforcement efforts are cited to legitimise state action. For instance, "These cases are charged under Section 44 of the Road Transport Act 1987" and "police are responsible for carrying out traffic enforcement" use legal authority to justify enforcement and punishment.

### ***Nomination***

Nomination strategies are employed to name and refer to social actors in ways that reinforce moral positioning. Perpetrators are nominated with (45 instances, 24.3%), through labels such as "drunk driver", "offender", "suspect", "accused", and "motorist under the influence". These labels are consistently negative, foregrounding the offence rather than the person. For instance, "drunk driving cases" and "drivers under the influence of alcohol" are repeated throughout the articles, creating a lexical chain that associates the actors with their transgression.

Victims are nominated through humanising terms such as "student", "college students", "motorcyclist", and age-marked references ("11-year-old", "28-year-old man"). These nominations evoke sympathy and relatability, positioning victims as innocent and deserving of protection. Authorities are nominated through formal titles and honorifics ("Datuk Seri", "Comm", "Director"), reinforcing their institutional legitimacy and social status.

The public is nominated collectively as "law-abiding road users", "motorists", or "the public", creating a sense of shared identity and collective vulnerability. This nomination strategy reinforces the us-versus-them framing, where the responsible majority is contrasted with the deviant minority.

### ***Perspectivation***

Perspectivation strategies reveal whose point of view dominates the discourse. Across the six articles, authorities are the primary perspectival source, with 28 instances of direct and indirect quotation. For example, the Home Affairs Minister states, "For accidents caused by drunk drivers, the police are responsible for carrying out traffic enforcement and conducting investigations with transparency and fairness to all parties involved". This quotation positions the minister as the authoritative voice on enforcement and justice, while perpetrators and victims remain silent.

In contrast, perpetrators are quoted directly in only two instances, and even then, their statements are framed within legal proceedings rather than personal explanation. Victims and their families are not quoted at all, despite the emotional impact of their losses. This perspectival imbalance reinforces the power asymmetry, where authorities control the narrative while offenders and victims are rendered voiceless.

### ***Intensification/Mitigation***

Intensification strategies are less frequent (12 instances, 6.5%) but serve to heighten the emotional force of the reporting. Expressions such as "wrong-way horror", "went viral", "crashed through a roadblock", and "seriously injured" intensify the severity of incidents, evoking shock and moral condemnation. For example, the phrase "two were killed after their motorcycle was run over" uses passive construction to intensify the victim's suffering while omitting the perpetrator's agency.

Mitigation is rare, with only two instances where language softens the severity of claims. For example, "allegedly" is used to qualify accusations before conviction, reflecting legal caution rather than moral mitigation. Overall, the discourse is heavily intensified, reinforcing the punitive framing and moral asymmetry.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how The Star newspaper represents drink-driving incidents through the combined lenses of van Leeuwen's social actor framework and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach. Analysis of six articles reveals consistent framing patterns where perpetrators are individualised yet negatively predicated, victims are humanised but passivated, and authorities are activated as legitimate enforcers. Referential strategies employing "us versus them" dichotomies, argumentative topoi of numbers and justice, and predication strategies collectively marginalise drunk drivers while legitimising punitive responses.

This study proposes multifaceted solutions including amended legislation with mandatory alcohol education programs, enhanced public awareness campaigns, improved alternative transport infrastructure, consistent enforcement with technology integration, victim-centred reporting and support, and community-based interventions. These solutions address both legislative and cultural dimensions of the drink-driving crisis, moving beyond punitive framing to holistic prevention strategies.

The findings contribute to understanding how media discourse shapes public perception, policy formulation, and social distance surrounding drink-driving in Malaysia. A more balanced reporting style could still recognise legal seriousness while allowing greater contextualisation, more victim-sensitive language, and stronger prevention-oriented framing. Such a shift would help media discourse contribute not only to condemnation but also to public education and safer behaviour.

The study has three main limitations. First, the corpus contains only six The Star articles and therefore cannot represent all Malaysian drink-driving coverage. Second, the study analyses one English-language newspaper media. Third, the analysis is textual and does not measure audience reception; consequently, claims about actual changes in public attitudes or behaviour are encouraged to be included in future study.

Future research should expand the corpus to include multiple newspapers, incorporate audience studies to examine reader reception, and analyse visual elements accompanying textual reports. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking changes in media framing alongside policy interventions could illuminate the reciprocal relationship between discourse and social change.

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