INTERACTING WITH READERS THROUGH THE USE OF METADISCOURSE IN COVID-19 NEWS

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Abstract: Metadiscourse is the way in which writers engage the readers to the discourse and reveal the writers' authority towards the content of the discourse making it credible (Crismore, 1989; Hyland, 1998, 2000). These features are investigated in this study due to the lack of appropriate guidelines in reference books, manuals or websites on journalism to write news specifically (Khattak, Yaqoob, & Basri, 2003). This study aims to find out how important metadiscourse features is in COVID-19 news. Two sets of news printed versions with and without metadiscourse, as well as writing prompts were given to 11 students from journalism courses and 11 students from non-journalism course from a local university to read in order to obtain their perceptions of the use and importance of metadiscourse features in COVID-19 news. This study will compare the students' responses to the COVID-19 news to gauge their feedback on which news is more engaging.

Keywords: COVID-19 news, metadiscourse, students, writing prompts

Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). At the end of 2019, the rapid spread of COVID-19 evolved into a global pandemic with long-lasting impacts on society. Malaysia is still in the midst of the endemic phase of the pandemic (Qistina, 2022). During the pandemic, Malaysia was subject to various restrictions on going out of the house (including trips around the neighbourhood as well as domestic and international travel) with most people encouraged to stay at home unless absolutely necessary under the threat of legal action by the government.

This research investigates the media literacy of readers via the use of metadiscourse features in COVID-19 news. Metadiscourse is a construct that allows for the reader and writer to better understand each other through the use of keywords or prompts to elucidate meaning (Hyland, 2004) This theory

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discusses how keywords are used, and the interpretations of those words by individuals. Media literacy refers to the ability to process and access information received (Potter, 2018). The ability to process the information presented is one of the main highlights of media literacy and the use or understanding of metadiscourse features help in this process.

Metadiscourse features are a common feature in written text and refers to keywords or "quirks" used by writers to express their opinions and communicate with the readers to make it credible (Hyland, 2018; Nash, 2021). They can be divided into two types which are, textual metadiscourse features that refer to features that help organise the text and interpersonal metadiscourse features refer to features that help the writer express their opinions and insert themselves into the text (Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 2018).

When metadiscourse features are framed against the encoding/decoding model of communication proposed by Stuart Hall in 1973, it could be said to be the certain words or phrases that allow writers or senders to encode their opinions on a certain topic and by the readers or receivers to decode the intended message and ensure a clear and accurate representation. Metadiscourse features allow readers to understand the writer's views and the overall message the writer is trying to present (Dafouz-Milne, 2008).

Metadiscourse and Its Role in Reducing Misrepresentations

In the Malaysian context, information about COVID-19 was often misconstrued or misrepresented resulting in intervention from the Malaysian Government had to issue an anti-fake news ordinance in 2021 to alleviate the effects and spread of fake news (Al Jazeera, 2021). Thus, this research is vital to understand the effects of metadiscourse features on readers and analyse their use as a tool to combat the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of news among the writer and readers. The usage of metadiscourse features have effects through the phrasing of a sentence and can affect how an issue is presented or understood (Bo, 2015). Ngadiron et al. (2021) also highlighted that these misinterpretations have the potential to cause widespread panic for in our society. These misinterpretations of fact can hamper government efforts to address pressing issues and delay their ability to act appropriately (van der Linden et al., 2020)

As the influence and spread of media expands, there is an increasing need for content creators such as journalists to ensure they present their ideas accurately and ensure accurate interpretations of fact. Previous research also found that journalists may lack the awareness that these features are also able to influence the readers' reaction to various issues (Joharry & Turiman, 2020). The journalists were found to be unaware of the functions of these features (Hyland, 2018) and often use these features just to add stylistic flair (Joharry & Turiman, 2020).

As seen in an experiment conducted by Craig (1999), metadiscourse affects the understanding of the readers and their expectations or interpretations may be changed through the use of the said features. The potential impact of even one misrepresented message being able to reach a wide audience and the importance to identify the use of metadiscourse features in such outlets is important for society. Tagliabue et al. (2020) stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic people were not able to find and/or understand information presented to them which was complicated or lengthy to understand. Thus, they resorted to the advice from sources such as authority figures for guidance (Tagliabue et al., 2020).

Compounding Impacts of Misrepresented News

Another thing to take note of would be the use of wire news in Malaysian and global media. Wire news or wire news agencies are organisations that act as wholesalers of news and sell their articles to be published by local newspapers which may not have the resources or capabilities to cover global or regional events (Rafeeq & Jiang, 2018). Misrepresentations done by wire news agencies could also create a compounding effect where problematic news articles would be disseminated at a global or regional level and create misinterpretations on a wider scale. The potential impacts are far reaching and something needs to be done to address it. However, in the context of journalism, this misrepresentation may not be intentional (Jack, 2017). Accelerating news cycles and complex terminologies may affect the ability of journalists to provide an accurate representation of facts that are easily understood by the public.

As highlighted by Communications and Multimedia Minister Tan Sri Annuar Musa, there is a lack of available training modules for news writers (Bernama, 2022). Although journalism is considered a professional occupation like accounting or law which has consistent and continuous training guidelines, journalists lack any structured training materials, and this research may help with the development of such training materials by providing some focus points for journalists and creating some academic points of reference.

To date, there is a lack of research into the use of textual and interpersonal metadiscourse features in the context of news writing and even fewer related to business news writing (Nugroho, 2020). Most of the researchers tended to focus on the metadiscourse features present in academic writing (Bal Gezegin & Bas, 2020; Hafizah Anwardeen et al., 2013; Lo et al., 2020; Mohamed et al., 2021; Shafique et al., 2019). They looked into the presence of metadiscourse features in academic writing and their uses. It was found that there was a strong co-relation between the use of metadiscourse and the persuasive quality of the written text (Shafique et al., 2019). Furthermore, Lo et al. (2020), also found that understanding metadiscourse features allowed writers to achieve better communication in their writing.

Mainly, the studies were more focused towards academic writing and how these metadiscourse features were used. Few studies looked at the uses of metadiscourse features in other aspects beyond academic writing but managed to highlight the use of metadiscourse features in the interpretation but not on the readers' responses towards the use of metadiscourse features in the texts.

Thus, the analysis of the readers' perception when they read on certain types of text is a current gap in research that has possible impacts on future writing and may serve as the basis for future training materials. This study aims to answer the research question which is "How do readers respond to COVID-19 news with metadiscourse and those without metadiscourse?"

Materials and Methods

This research utilised a mixed-mode research method where the students' responses are analysed on a quantitative and qualitative level. 11 students from journalism courses and 11 students from non-journalism course from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), a local university were selected to participate in this research via the snowball sampling method as per the research criteria and they were coded as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Students data

Student code	Gender	Course studied	Student code	Gender	Course studied

Journalism student 1	F	Journalism	Non-journalism student 1	M	Software Engineering
Journalism student 2	F	Journalism	Non-journalism student 2	M	Civil Engineering
Journalism student 3	M	Journalism	Non-journalism student 3	M	Actuarial Science
Journalism student 4	M	Journalism	Non-journalism student 4	M	Actuarial Science
Journalism student 5	M	Journalism	Non-journalism student 5	M	Mechatronics Engineering
Journalism student 6	F	Journalism	Non-journalism student 6	M	Actuarial Science
Journalism student 7	F	Journalism	Non-journalism student 7	F	Education
Journalism student 8	F	Journalism	Non-journalism student 8	F	Finance
Journalism student 9	F	Journalism	Non-journalism student 9	M	Medicine
Journalism student 10	M	Journalism	Non-journalism student 10	M	Quantity Surveying
Journalism student 11	F	Journalism	Non-journalism student 11	F	Medicine

The snowball sampling method was employed to gather the beforementioned students. This method makes use of a small number of initial qualified contacts (meet the research criteria) who are then encouraged to invite other participants who meet the research criteria as well (Parker et al., 2019). Although it could be argued that this sampling method is not purely random, it suits the design of this research as students from UTAR were required for the research and it allowed the researchers to contact them and to encourage them to participate in this research.

Samples

Two articles were taken from *The Star* and *The Edge* newspapers each. These newspapers were chosen as they are the leading English and leading business newspapers in Malaysia respectively. Metadiscourse features in the extracts used were removed and the original articles as well as the modified articles are shown to the students. Their preferences and reasons for their choices for the sets of news were compared and tabulated.

The first set of news that was taken from *The Star*, January 2022 issue, was about the direction on where Malaysia was heading due to the pandemic. This first set of news consists of News 1 and News 2. News 1 was without textual metadiscourse, while News 2 was with textual metadiscourse. For the second set of news, it was taken from *The Edge*, February 2022 issue, in which it discussed how Malaysia was considering COVID-19 immunity passport to revive travel. This second set of news consists of News 3 and News 4. News 3 was without interpersonal metadiscourse, while News 4 was with interpersonal metadiscourse. The participants would give their responses based on their preference of the news that they read through writing prompts. The writing prompts were constructed based on the adaptation of Dafouz-Milne's (2008) metadiscourse model. For the writing prompts, the participants were asked which text they preferred: the text with metadiscourse or without metadiscourse. Besides giving their preferences, the participants had to give reasons for their preferences by identifying the language features that made the texts engaging to them.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

All the instruments used were checked by two inter-raters to ensure the validity of the items and they act as independent checkers to ensure that the test is 'logical' and valid. Vague language and incorrect sentence structures were identified and revised, accordingly. Subsequently, the news and writing prompts were piloted on six students.

Prior to the data collection, consent was obtained from the participants of the study via consent forms. The data collection process involved exposing the participants consisting of journalism and non-journalism students to two sets of news, Set A (consisting of News 1 and News 2) and Set B (consisting of News 3 and News 4). Then, the participants were prompted to answer the at set of writing prompts after each set of news. The participants were given one hour for each set of news to read and answer the writing prompts and it took two hours in total for the students to finish the writing prompts.

Results and Discussion

Firstly, the overall students' responses towards news with and without metadiscourse were tabulated in Table 2 and Table 3. It can be seen that in both sets of news, students in general preferred the news with metadiscourse features (News 2 and News 4 respectively) compared to the news without metadiscourse features (News 1 and News 3 respectively. This would indicate a preference for text with metadiscourse features by the students in this research.

One should also take note that in the feedback received by the participants, they do not seem especially aware of term metadiscourse features but identified the keywords accordingly. Thus, the statements were rephrased and interpreted it as if they understood the necessary terms and metadiscourse categories. For example, if the students stated that 'The words *firstly, secondly*, and *thirdly* helped me read the text easily', the statement was rephrased to 'The use of metadiscourse features helped them to read the text easily'.

Table 2: Journalism students' preferences on News 1 and News 2

News	Frequency (%)
News 1 (without textual metadiscourse)	27.27%
News 2 (with textual metadiscourse)	72.73%
Total	100%

Table 3: Non-journalism students' preferences on News 1 and News 2

News	Frequency (%)
News 1 (without textual metadiscourse)	18.18%
News 2 (with textual metadiscourse)	81.82%
Total	100%

As seen in Table 2, most of the journalism students preferred to read News 2 (72.73%) and fewer students preferred to read News 1 (27.27%). A similar trend was also noticeable for non-journalism students in Table 3, where more students preferred to read News 2 (81.82%) as opposed to those who

preferred to read News 1 (18.18%). This mirrors the statements by Hyland (2018), which stated that textual metadiscourse makes the news clearer because it helps with the logical flow.

In News 2, there were seven textual metadiscourse features identified in the text. The student's subjective responses for why they chose News 2 (with textual metadiscourse) will be corelated to each metadiscourse feature shown. This frames the readers' responses against the metadiscourse features present in News 2 and are possible explanations on why they chose News 2. The subjective responses of the students who chose News 1 will be highlighted after that to show possible outliers or other reasons that might lead to other readers' responses.

Students who chose News 2 based on metadiscourse feature 1: Announcements

Journalism student 8 mentioned that the structure was clearer in News 2 as it informed the user about future content in the later part of the news. Non-journalism student 3 preferred News 2 as it provided comprehensive information and 'helps to capture the readers' attention to anticipate on what to read on later in the news'.

Students who chose News 2 based on metadiscourse feature 2: Sequencers

Journalism student 9 also chose News 2 as the use of linking words such as firstly and secondly helped to organise the text and highlight linkages or divisions between the sentences. This is also supported by the statements by journalism student 10 who talked about the division and smooth flow created by the same metadiscourse features firstly and secondly. Non-journalism student 5 chose News 2 as it was easier to understand the linkage from point to point through the use of adverbs.

Students who chose News 2 based on metadiscourse feature 3: Logical markers

Journalism student 10 mentioned that News 2 utilises more conjunctions and connecting phrases to make the content flow smoothly throughout the article through the use of *furthermore*. Journalism students 2, 7, and 11 also mentioned that text used transition words in their writing that help connect various sentences in the text to provide further elaboration. Non-journalism student 3 chose News 2 as the transitional words such as *furthermore* expressed that the following sentences are still related to the argument mentioned before the paragraph and made it easier to understand.

Students who chose News 2 based on metadiscourse feature 4: Code glosses

Journalism student 4 stated that the writer provided explanations before the use of abbreviation such as *emerging and developing economies (EDEs)* which helped ensure the understanding of the reader. Additionally, journalism student 7 stated that includes more information for the readers to understand. Non-Journalism student 6 stated that News 2 provided explanations and additional information which gives the readers more details and helps their understanding towards particular statements.

Students who chose News 2 based on metadiscourse feature 5: Topicalisers

Journalism student 1 also mentioned that she chose News 2 as the subject for each paragraph or sentence is placed at the start of the sentence helping them to follow the chronology of the text. Journalism student 4 also mentioned that the journalist introduced a new topic regarding the forecast from the International Monetary Fund. Non-journalism student 4 stated that it was easier to read as the linkers like the phrase *forecast from the International Monetary Fund were used.*

Students who chose News 2 based on metadiscourse feature 6: Illocutionary markers

Journalism student 2 mentioned that she chose News 2 as the journalist provided his personal point of view and extra information, through suggestions such as the phrase *I suggest that....* Journalism student 11 also talked about the interpretations and suggestions provided by the journalist to help the readers to understand the text. Non-journalism student 1 stated that he chose News 2 as it was more convincing through the use of phrase *I suggest*.

Students who chose News 2 based on metadiscourse feature 7: Reminders

Journalism student 2 also mentioned that she chose News 2 because it reminded her about previous parts of the news through the use of the phrase *As mentioned about the problems that were discussed previously.* Non-journalism student 8 preferred News 2 over News 1 as the phrases used ensured clarity and coherence by informing the readers it was connected to previous information.

Students who chose News 1 based on other factors

Journalism student 3 stated that they preferred News 1 as it was shorter and was less complicated. Journalism student 6 had a similar reason which stated that News 1 was more straightforward and didn't overload the reader. Non-journalism students 8 also mentioned that she preferred News 1 due to the more direct manner. Non-journalism student 11 felt that the journalist should not have inserted himself or herself through the use of illocutionary markers when reporting the news.

In conclusion, the majority of students chose News 2 which had metadiscourse features with reasons that could be attributed to the metadiscourse features; hence, textual metadiscourse plays a vital role in making the news cogent for the readers (Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 2018). However, there were some students who opted for News 1 because they preferred to read news that was not lengthy with simpler words and did not have extra information. They preferred news which was shorter in form and also commented on the role of journalist who was not clear in news reporting.

Table 4: Journalism students' preferences on News 3 and News 4

News	Frequency (%)
News 3 (without interpersonal metadiscourse)	27.27%
News 4 (with interpersonal metadiscourse)	72.73%
Total	100%

Table 5: Non-journalism students' preferences on News 3 and News 4

News	Frequency (%)
News 3 (without interpersonal metadiscourse)	18.18%
News 4 (with interpersonal metadiscourse)	81.82%
Total	100%

As seen in Table 4, most of the journalism students preferred to read News 4 (72.73%) and fewer students preferred to read News 3 (27.27%). A similar trend was also noticeable for non-journalism students in Table 5 where more students preferred to read news 4 (81.82%) as opposed to those who preferred to read News 3 (18.18%).

The frequency of readers selecting news with and without interpersonal metadiscourse features are the same as in the previous set which consisted of news with and without textual metadiscourse features but the respondents were not the same. This preference for news with interpersonal metadiscourse features matches the statements made by (Hyland, 2018) who stated that interpersonal metadiscourse allowed readers to engage with the text better and for writers to decode the intentions of the writer accurately.

In News 4, there were five interpersonal metadiscourse features identified in the text. The students' subjective responses for why they chose News 4 (with textual metadiscourse) will be corelated to each metadiscourse feature shown below. This frames the readers' responses against the metadiscourse features present in News 4 and are possible explanations on why they chose news 4. The subjective responses of the students who chose News 3 will be highlighted after that to show possible outliers or other reasons that might lead to other readers' responses.

Students who chose News 4 based on metadiscourse feature 8: Attributors

Journalism student 3 mentioned that he chose News 4 as the information was sourced from remarkable people. Non-journalism student 3 stated that he liked the credibility shown by News 4 because of the quotations.

Students who chose News 4 based on metadiscourse feature 9: Hedges

Journalism student 11 mentioned that the use of metadiscourse features makes people think about possible responses during COVID-19. Non-journalism student 6 emphasised the same as journalism student 11 where the use of could and would was described as able to encourage the readers to think.

Students who chose News 4 based on metadiscourse feature 10: Attitude markers

Journalism student 9 liked the use of metadiscourse features creating a 'conversation environment in the text for the readers that makes them feel like they are on the scene'. Non-journalism student 3 mentioned that including the journalist's feelings allows the readers to relate to the situation in the text.

Students who chose News 4 based on metadiscourse feature 11: Commentaries

Journalism student 2 expressed her tendency towards News 4 as the writer asked the readers' questions in the story to get readers to think and question the recent actions of the situation. Non-journalism student 2 felt that the use of commentaries allowed the journalist to relate herself with the readers by using the pronoun *we*.

Students who chose News 4 based on metadiscourse feature 12: Certainty markers

Certainty markers express commitment to the statements made in the text (Dafouz-Milne, 2008). Journalism student 4 liked the emphasis placed on the problems in the text through the use of the word clearly by the journalist. Non-journalism student 7 mentioned that the word clearly encouraged confidence that the journalist knew the topic the journalist was reporting in News 4.

Students who chose News 3 based on other factors

Journalism students 1, 5, and 6 stated that they preferred News 3 as it was simple and easy to read. This feedback is quite unexpected as there were no metadiscourse features in News 3. This is also echoed by non-journalism students 5, and 10. This is similar to the information received from the previous set of news (News 1 and News 2) showing consistency in the reasons why students would prefer news without metadiscourse features.

In conclusion, the majority of students chose News 4 which had metadiscourse features with reasons that could be attributed to the respective metadiscourse features; hence, interpersonal metadiscourse was appealing for the readers as it involved readers with the text more and created a pseudo-dialogue with the writer (Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 2018). However, there were some students who opted for News 3 because they preferred to read news that was more direct that did not require as much interaction with the journalist. They preferred news which was shorter and did not see the point in interaction with the journalist.

Conclusion

Overall, the results from this study indicate that most of the readers reacted favourably towards the use of metadiscourse features and preferred them over articles without metadiscourse features. Although a majority of the journalism and non-journalism students preferred text with metadiscourse features, some journalism and non-journalism students preferred the news without metadiscourse features due to its straightforward nature and the lack of 'fanfare' as a simple presentation of facts. It is important to have metadiscourse features to guide the readers in the text as not to cause confusion and misinterpretation of the information in the news. Readers' responses are important to be taken into account to ensure that the journalist would emphasise not only on the clarity but on the readers' engagement to the text.

However, there are some issues with this research where it is quite limited in scope in terms of the sample size. Only 11 journalism students and 11 non-journalism students were involved in this study due to time and budget constraints. Thus, this research cannot be a representation to a larger group of readers but can be an indication that further research is warranted to validate the results on a larger scale. It would be best for future research to expand the research to a larger group of readers in other universities.

The results from this research did indicate that there is a need to focus on the use of metadiscourse features when conveying information as they are important. Additionally, they should be taught to expose the students to the real world in the working place. As discussed earlier, most of the students in this research not only preferred the news with metadiscourse features; they were able to identify and justify their selection of preferred articles based on the presence of metadiscourse features even with limited exposure towards it.

Their reasons for preferring articles with metadiscourse features directly aligned with the types of metadiscourse features although they could not categorise or name them directly. Hence, further training would be beneficial to allow the students to use these features in a more structured style instead of the students using it intrinsically but not in a structured manner. As students were able to identify the metadiscourse features, the use of writing prompts and constructed texts with and without metadiscourse could be used as a teaching resource in a writing classroom.

The research identifies the possibilities for future research as well as a need to utilise metadiscourse features in both the creation and use of teaching materials for students. These features have a positive impact on the understanding of the students reading text with these features. Thus, future teaching

materials should be aware of the use of these metadiscourse features and work towards incorporating them consciously to improve the quality of the materials. Additionally, it identifies a need to ensure that students are able to consciously know and use metadiscourse features which will help them in their writing and understanding process.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

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