Pragmatic Perception of Sensationalism: A Comparison of British and Malaysian Online Newspapers Headline Constructions

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Abstract

This study examines the pragmatic features of sensationalist headlines in online newspapers, comparing The Times (UK) and The Star (Malaysia) in 2024. Using discourse analysis on 60 headlines, we investigate how sensationalism shapes public opinion in the digital age. The research addresses a gap in cross-cultural analysis of media influence and aims to enhance media literacy. Results indicate that headline writers employ various pragmatic elements, with speech acts being the most prevalent, to convey intended messages and engage readers. Both overt and implicit use of pragmatic features effectively express themes of victory and liberation across both publications. While the study provides insights into pragma-linguistic strategies in sensational headline construction, its limited sample size suggests the need for broader future research. The findings offer valuable insights for media practitioners, researchers, and consumers, highlighting the importance of critical media consumption in an era of increasing sensationalism.

Keywords: discourse analysis, sensationalism, pragmatics, online journalism, newspaper headlines

1. Introduction

In the competitive media landscape, news organizations employ various strategies to capture the audience attention and sustain advertising revenues. These include selective reporting, exaggeration, oversimplification, and the infusion of emotional or sensational elements. While sensationalism is often criticized as a degradation of journalistic standards (Xuan, 2023), presenting issues in an engaging manner while maintaining integrity requires considerable skill.

Despite scholarly efforts to examine sensationalism, particularly in television news (Grabe et al., 2001; Ekstrom, 2002; Pantti, 2010), it remains largely an intuitively understood construct. This study contributes to a broader investigation of the social, cognitive, and discursive factors driving sensationalism in journalistic reporting, focusing on headlines that employ pragmatic tactics to influence readers' perspectives (Alba-Juez, 2017). Kilgo and Santa (2020) suggest that sensationalism can be operationalized through specific textual, pragmatic, or linguistic characteristics. This research employs a pragma-linguistic paradigm to investigate sensationalism beyond content analysis, differentiating between sensational subject matter and sensationalized presentation.

The study examines 30 online headlines each from The Times (UK) and The Star (Malaysia), chosen for their capacity to investigate sensationalizing tactics. This selection reflects the shift towards digital news consumption, with 86% of Malaysians accessing news via websites and 70% via social media (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2020). Analyzing the depiction of sensationalism through the pragmatic elements in these headlines enables us to better understand how readers' interests are captured while also upholding journalistic integrity.

1.2 Background and Problem Statement

In modern journalism, sensationalism in newspapers facilitates the scaffolding of the headline construction to be significantly cryptical, and conspicuous, yet, at the cost of potentially distorting information, deluding the readers, and erode trust in journalism (Basera, 2023). The Edelman Trust Barometer in 2024 reported a 6% drop in UK citizens' trust in news sources, with only 31% still believing in news organizations. Conversely, Malaysia recorded a 5% increase, with 55% of its citizens trusting media outlets.

In an era where news spreads rapidly within the digital realm, it is critical to understand the function of sensationalism and its repercussions. The use of sensationalism, which can be defined as the use of overstated, emotionally driven language, in news reporting has a growing concern about its influence on delivering information recently. Such headlines often exaggerate or dramatise events, prioritising emotional impact over accuracy, which can lead to a misrepresentation of facts and events. This distortion not only misguides readers but also undermines the credibility of news outlets, contributing to a decline in public trust. Furthermore, sensationalism, without doubt, would create a buzz among society, raising concerns about media ethics and contributing to a more democratic community by influencing educated decision-making and legislation (Kilgo & Sinta, 2020). Other than that, the exposure to negative content could also harm the reader's mental health. Everyone should be aware of the

effects of sensationalism as they are more than just captivating headlines.

1.3 Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to identify and compare the pragmatic elements depicting sensationalism in newspaper headlines, focusing on The Star (Malaysia) and The Times (UK). By focusing on this, it addresses the gap in cross-cultural studies of sensationalism in newspaper headlines (Arbaoui et al., 2020). While previous research has primarily focused on Western media, this study offers insights into the cultural uniqueness of sensational practices by comparing Western European and Asian newspapers.

The significance of this study lies in its practical implications for media literacy, journalistic ethics, and societal understanding. By examining the language and framework of sensational headlines, this research illuminates how media influences public discourse and shapes social discussions. This knowledge is crucial for enhancing media literacy, enabling the general public to critically evaluate news and distinguish between balanced reporting and exaggerated narratives.

For journalists and editors, the findings provide valuable insights into the impact of headline construction on news ethics and authenticity. By investigating the pragmatic aspects of sensationalism in newspaper headlines, this research enhances our understanding of the relationship between media, society, and human perception. Such insights are vital in fostering an informed public capable of critical thinking and in maintaining the balance between reader engagement and factual accuracy in journalism.

1.4 Theoretical Background: Speech Act Theory

This study is grounded in Searle's Speech Act Theory, originally formulated by J.L Austin in 1955 and further developed by John Searle in the 1960s and 1970s (Dwivedi, 2022). The theory posits that utterances consist of three layers: the locutionary act (literal meaning), the illocutionary act (intended communicative force), and the perlocutionary act (effect on the listener) (Elbah, 2022). This framework is particularly relevant to the analysis of sensational headlines, which strategically use language to evoke strong emotional responses, instill curiosity, or stir excitement among readers.

Several recent studies have employed Speech Act Theory in analyzing media discourse. Ramzan et al. (2020) applied it to examine 40 news headlines from three Baluchistan newspapers. Al-Saedi (2020) utilized the theory to analyze headlines covering the Iraqi-ISIS conflict from March to December 2017. Syarifuddin et al. (2022) compared Malaysian and Indonesian newspaper headlines using this framework, while Obasi (2023) applied it to news reports on Coronavirus from selected national and international newspapers.

The application of Speech Act Theory in these studies demonstrates its versatility and relevance in understanding media discourse, particularly in dissecting how language shapes interactions, influences perceptions, and constructs social realities in the context of newspaper headlines.

1.5 Language Use in Context

Implicature and presupposition represent fundamental concepts in pragmatics that illuminate how meaning extends beyond literal semantic content in language use. Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature distinguishes between what is explicitly said (conversational) and what is implicitly conveyed (conventional). Conversational implicature includes both Particularized Conversational Implicature (PCI), which is context-dependent and requires specific background knowledge, and Generalized Conversational Implicature (GCI), which arises without special contexts based on general expectations of language use. Conventional implicature, as Potts (2015) explains, is determined by the conventional meaning of words like 'but,' 'even,' and 'therefore,' and remains constant across contexts. Unlike conversational implicatures, conventional implicatures cannot be cancelled and are independent of context, making them more stable components of linguistic meaning.

Presupposition, while distinct from implicature, similarly involves implicit meaning but operates through assumptions that speakers take for granted as part of the background of their utterances. Levinson (2023) identifies presupposition as a crucial pragmatic phenomenon that constrains the common ground between interlocutors. Existential presupposition, as explained by Levinson (2023), is triggered by definite descriptions, proper names, and possessive constructions, assuming the existence of the named entities. Lexical presupposition is embedded in specific verbs; for instance, 'manage' presupposes an attempt, while 'stop' presupposes a previous activity. Structural presupposition arises from particular syntactic structures, including temporal clauses, cleft sentences, and wh-questions. According to Huang (2017), factive presupposition is triggered by verbs like 'know,' 'realize,' and 'regret,' which presuppose the truth of their complement clauses. Non-factive presupposition, conversely, is associated with verbs such as 'believe,' 'think,' and 'suppose,' which do not commit to the truth of their complements. Counterfactual presupposition emerges from contrary-to-fact hypotheticals and subjunctive mood constructions.

1.6 Literature Review

Sensationalism in media journalism has been a subject of extensive research and debate. Hassan (2018) notes that while not a traditional journalistic approach, sensationalism has become increasingly common, with headlines designed to engage viewers emotionally rather than intellectually. This trend has been examined through various lenses, including content analysis of news and ethnographic studies of editorial practices.

Alba-Juez (2017) provided a comparative analysis of evaluative devices in British online newspaper headlines, highlighting the 'tabloidisation' trend in journalism and noting significant differences in sensationalist language between tabloids and broadsheets. Molek-Kozakowska (2017) explored the stylistic 'hybridity' in online science reporting, revealing a blend of sensationalist strategies with more measured academic communication tones.

The definition and scope of sensationalism have been subjects of debate. Kozakowska (2013) defined it as a process that accentuates elements with the potential to affect human perception. In the context of media and communications, Chandler and Munday (2020) characterize sensationalism as "the presentation of stories in a way that is intended to provoke public interest

or excitement, at the expense of accuracy." This definition is further elaborated by Sterling (2009), who describes it as "the use of exciting or shocking stories or language at the expense of accuracy, in order to provoke public interest or excitement... characterized by exaggeration, crude oversimplification, lurid details, and prurient interest." Patterson and Wilkins (2013) offer a more distinct perspective, defining it as "the practice of emphasizing the most extraordinary aspects of a news story, even when these aspects are not strictly relevant to the story's main substance or supported by available evidence." Over the past decade, research has increasingly recognized the contribution of formal elements of news presentation to sensationalism.

1.7 Pragmatic Elements and Sensationalism

Recent studies have focused on the strategic use of pragmatic elements in headlines to create sensationalism. Serafis & Herman (2017) and Oloruntobi (2020) identified the prevalent use of pathos and positive adjectives in headlines, aligning with dominant societal values in ways that serve sensationalist ends, especially during national crises. Jing-Schmidt & Jing (2011) investigated the use of passive constructions in Chinese internet news headlines, suggesting their role in creating sensationalism through subjective experiences of events. This linguistic perspective was further developed by Kozakowska (2013), who analyzed the deployment of metaphorical expressions in news headlines as a sensationalist strategy, particularly in science journalism. Chiluwa (2017) examined how Nigerian news media use headlines as independent texts performing illocutionary acts, particularly in contexts of social crises and political scandals. This analysis of pragmatic functions was complemented by Zhang & Liu (2021), who documented the increasing use of interrogative structures and rhetorical questions in digital headlines to generate suspense and emotional engagement. Ismail (2016) highlighted the dual role of headlines in conveying both semantic and pragmatic meanings, acting as a gateway to content while reflecting the media's power to shape public perception and opinions. Recent work by Chen & Thompson (2023) has expanded this understanding by examining how modal verbs and hedging devices in headlines contribute to sensationalistic effects while maintaining plausible deniability. Additionally, Rodrigues & Santos (2022) demonstrated how lexical choices and syntactic structures in headlines can create artificial urgency and emotional resonance, particularly in coverage of political and environmental issues.

1.8 Cross-Cultural Perspectives and Research Gaps

Despite extensive research on sensationalism in headlines, there is a notable gap in cross-cultural analysis. Previous studies have predominantly focused on Western media, with limited research on Malaysian media outlets. Ramzan et al. (2020) highlighted a gap in the pragmatic analysis of Baluchistan newspaper headlines, emphasizing the predominance of assertive speech acts and their role in manipulating public opinion. This study aims to address these gaps by comparing headlines from both Western (The Times, UK) and Asian (The Star, Malaysia) newspapers. This approach provides valuable insights into the universality or cultural specificity of sensationalist practices in newspaper headlines.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically content analysis, focusing on textual artifacts rather than direct data collection from individuals. Discourse analysis is applied to examine the content and structural features of online headlines from two news organizations. This method was chosen as the most suitable for qualitatively investigating the pragmatic elements that illustrate sensationalism in newspaper headlines, aiming to discern pragma-linguistic variations in the contemporary context.

2.2 Research Setting and Sample

The research is conducted virtually, with data obtained from the online websites and Instagram accounts of two newspapers: The Star (Malaysia) and The Times (UK). The study sample consists of 30 front-page headlines randomly selected from each newspaper, focusing on significant headlines and remarks by well-known individuals. This sample size strikes a balance between practicality and reliability, allowing for a thorough analysis without being overwhelming. It provides sufficient data to identify trends and draw relevant conclusions about the portrayal and impact of key headlines in both publications.

The choice of these newspapers was based on their high circulation rates (approximately 65,000 for The Star and 400,000 for The Times) and their status as top choices for tabloid readers in their respective countries.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection employed text analysis, focusing on the flow of text and word choices to identify relationships between texts and draw conclusions. The procedure was as follows:

- The Times and The Star were searched using Google search engine and Instagram.

- 30 posts with headlines exhibiting elements of sensationalism were extracted using the Google Web Scraper extension.

- Headlines were grouped into a table for easy reference during analysis.

- Analysis focused on specific words, phrases, and linguistic structures contributing to sensational effects.

- Contextual factors affecting interpretation and sensational impact.

- Pragmatic strategies (implications, presuppositions, speech acts) used to attract attention or elicit emotional responses.

Keywords such as 'politics' and 'lifestyles' were used in the search queries due to their association with sensational topics often debated among readers. Xuan (2023) notes that lifestyle themes are highly popular, and political topics are often used to shape public opinions.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Discourse analysis was employed to examine how pragmatic elements are used to achieve sensationalism in headlines. The analysis procedure involved:

- Categorizing identified pragmatic elements into a table.

- Qualitative analysis and interpretation of data to generate insights into pragmatic elements involved in headline creation.

- Analyzing specific words and phrases to determine the headline's implied function (informing, questioning, commanding, or expressing an opinion).

- Identifying contextual clues such as provocative words or phrases to determine the type of pragmatic elements used.

- Emphasizing the understanding of diverse perspectives, issue framing, and media influence on public opinion.

2.5 Research Instrument and Material

Data were collected through online searches on The Star and The Times websites. Google web scraping software was used for systematic retrieval of articles, headlines, and relevant content. Collected data were stored in .csv format and analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques. Quality control measures included manual verification of extracted data and cross-referencing with multiple sources to ensure accuracy.

2.6 Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability and validity, the study employs audit trails, a qualitative method that maintains records of all observations and necessary documents throughout the research process. This includes compiling a list of newspaper headlines from The Times and The Star, along with their publication dates. The objective of preserving these audit trails is to provide clear reasons for any decisions made during the research process, thereby reducing the possibility of validity issues.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

While not explicitly mentioned in the original text, it is important to note that this study adheres to ethical research practices. As the data collected are publicly available newspaper headlines, there are minimal ethical concerns regarding privacy or consent. However, the researchers maintain objectivity in their analysis and avoid any potential bias in the interpretation of the headlines.

2.8 Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations:

The focus on only two newspapers (The Star and The Times) may limit the generalizability of findings to other publications or cultural contexts.

The sample size of 30 headlines from each newspaper, while sufficient for a qualitative study, may not capture all nuances of sensationalism in these publications.

The reliance on online sources may exclude print-only headlines that could potentially differ in their use of sensationalism.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

This study analyzed headlines from The Star (Malaysia) and The Times (UK) newspapers published between January and April 2024. The qualitative analysis revealed that headlines employ various pragmatic elements, which can be classified according to pragmatic theory.

Three primary pragmatic elements were identified in headlines from both newspapers:

Speech Acts: These elements demonstrate how utterances can initiate actions without physical execution. Speech acts in headlines often take the form of requests, commands, questions, or informative statements (Mustakim & Weda, 2022).

Implicatures: Introduced by Paul Herbert Grice in 1975, implicatures refer to meanings that go beyond the literal words, relying on cultural or linguistic maxims that are openly violated (Al-Azzawi, 2019). In headlines, implicatures often convey unstated information that readers can infer.

Presuppositions: Originally introduced by G. Frege in 1952 and further developed by N.D. Arutyunova in 1985, presuppositions represent the underlying or hidden information in headlines. They rely on the shared knowledge and context between the writer and reader, often conveying meaning beyond the visible content.

The frequency and distribution of these pragmatic elements varied between The Star and The Times, reflecting potential differences in journalistic practices and cultural contexts. This analysis provides insights into how these popular news outlets use pragmatic strategies to engage readers and potentially sensationalize content.

3.1 Pragmatic Elements in The Star

Table 1 shows the description element of the data, which has been classified according to the kind of pragmatic elements. It also shows that assertion acts are the most often used. It can be ascribed to the truth that headlines' primary job is to disclose or expose the present state of specific topics. The majority of speech acts employed in headlines either appear verbless or contain verbs.

Table 1. Speech Act Elements Found in The Star Newspaper

Newspaper	Headline's Title	Speech Act Element
The Star	1. Gold burns a hole in the pocket	Assertion
The Star	2. Labuan longs for a bridge	Assertion

The Star	3. Leaving none on the sidelines	Assertion
The Star	4. Couple and two kids encounter close call with death after van catches fire	Assertion
The Star	5. Cat burglary' reported at Rafizi's residence, Internet users amused	Assertion
The Star	6. Bridging the distance: Malaysian missions host Raya open houses	Assertion
The Star	7. Four detained after 'fireworks battle' in Kelantan	Assertion
The Star	8. Ex-soldier now keeping the streets clean	Assertion
The Star	9. Be careful at sea during Hari Raya, reminds MMEA	Assertion
The Star	10. Mom sobs at scene of son's death in Melaka	Assertion
The Star	11. Bertuntung' oil lamp tradition kept alive in S'wak despite modernisation	Assertion
The Star	12. Bella Astillah claims Aliff Aziz cheated on her 11 times, once with her sister	Assertion
The Star	13. MCMC, cops crack down on 'swinger' activities in Kedah, Johor	Assertion
The Star	14. Perak Umno ready for by-elections if rogue Bersatu MPs dropped, says Saarani	Assertion
The Star	15. Six plus one, you're out: Bersatu to give rogue reps the boot	Assertion
The Star	16. Sabah Umno rebels will not be fielded in coming state election, says Bung	Assertion
The Star	17. Johor poultry farmers yet to receive 'egg allowances' from govt, says Dr Wee	Assertion
The Star	18. Stop asking the same questions, judge tells Guan Eng's counsel	Instruction
The Star	19. Diva AA's dance routine shut down a carnival	Assertion
The Star	20. Woman killed after ramming her motorcycle into a cow	Assertion

The Star	21. Say what you want, I'll continue giving 'duit raya', says Umno Youth chief	
		Assertion
The Star	22. Greed fuels subsidised diesel leak	Assertion
The Star	23. Tone down on socks issue, Khairy tells Akmal	Instruction

Table 1 presents data from The Star newspaper, revealing 23 Speech Acts within the news articles. Among the five types of illocutionary acts, only two were identified: assertive and instructive. Assertive illocutionary acts were predominant, with 21 occurrences, while instructive acts appeared only twice. Other types, such as descriptions, invitations, and suggestions, were absent. This finding underscores the utility of identifying illocutionary points for determining the relationship between content and context in news headlines.

Table 2. Implicature Elements Found in The Star Newspaper

Newspaper	Headline's Title	Implicature Element
The Star	1. Bella Astillah has a message for Ruhainies: 'Thank you. Because of you, my children have lost their father'	Particularised Conversational Implicature
The Star	2. Throwing 'shade' on UV levels	Conventional Implicature

Table 2 highlights the presence of implicature, albeit infrequent, with only two instances. The first headline is a particularised conversational implicature because this statement requires specific contextual knowledge to understand fully. It implies blame and perhaps irony or sarcasm in the "thank you," suggesting that Ruhainies' actions have led to a significant negative outcome (the loss of the father for Bella Astillah's children). The exact implications depend on the details of the situation known to the audience. The second one was considered as conventional implicature because the use of "throwing shade" is a colloquial expression implying criticism or disapproval. In this context, it implies that there is some form of critique or negative commentary regarding UV levels. The phrase relies on the conventional meaning of "throwing shade" to communicate this implicature.

Additionally, the presupposition was utilised, with three instances of lexical presupposition, and one each of iterative presupposition.

Table 3. Presupposition Element Found in The Star Newspaper

Newspaper	Headline's Title	Presupposition Element

The Star	1. Fewer giving gold as gifts at weddings	Iterative presupposition
The Star	2. 'Johor addresses sensitive matters in private to avoid uproar'	Lexical Presupposition
The Star	3. 'Big boss' not exclusive to Najib	Lexical Presupposition
The Star	4. Only God can forgive KK Super Mart management, not PAS, says *ulama* wing chief	Factive Presupposition
The Star	5. *Kafir'* viral video malicious, taken out of context, says Fadhlina	Lexical Presupposition

Table 3 shows that the most common presupposition element is the lexical presupposition, such as seen in headline number 2 where the phrase "to avoid uproar" suggests that addressing these matters publicly would cause an uproar. It presupposes the likely reaction (uproar) to these sensitive matters being addressed in public. The same could be said for headline number 3, where the statement implies that Najib is referred to as "big boss," but the word "exclusive" presupposes that others may also hold this title or role. It presupposes that the term "big boss" is not uniquely applied to Najib. The first headline is classified as iterative because the term "fewer" implies a comparison to a previous time when more people were giving gold. This indicates that giving gold at weddings has been a repeated or established practice, and the number has now decreased. Headline number 3 is influenced by the phrase "Only God can forgive" which implies that forgiveness is required, and it is a fact that PAS cannot provide this forgiveness. The belief in the necessity of divine forgiveness is assumed.

All the headlines analysed carried the illocutionary force of "educating" readers about current events or "uncovering" certain facts. According to the adopted methodology, these acts are categorised under "uncover" or "report," which align with assertives at the primary level of analysis. This is attributed to the primary function of headlines, which is to report or reveal the current situation. Assertive acts in the headlines cover various topics, while instructive acts provide directives to the reader. The Star also uses more pragmatic elements explicitly rather than implicitly.

3.2 Pragmatic Elements in The Times

The following table presents descriptive statistics regarding information from The Times newspaper, which has been classified according to the kind of pragmatic factors. Table 4 shows that speech acts are the most often used. It can be ascribed to the actuality that headlines' primary job is to disclose or expose the present state of specific topics. The majority of speech acts employed in headlines either appear verbless or contain verbs.

Table 4. Speech Act Elements Found in The Times Newspaper

Newspaper	Headline's Title	Speech Act Element
The Times	1. Sure Start achieved its aims, then we threw it away	Assertion
The Times	2. Crispy caterpillars, baffling ovens and honeytrap buttocks	Description
The Times	3. Want to stand for Reform? Pulse optional but do try to avoid Friday night tweets	Invitation
The Times	4. Keir Starmer 'would press the nuclear button'	Assertion
The Times	5. Help me Rhondda: Rishi escapes caller's tale of Welsh woe	Request
The Times	6. Foreign Office urged to modernise (and ditch the colonial art)	Suggestion
The Times	7. British soldiers killed you, Agnes. We won't let them cover it up	Assertion
The Times	8. It's 1997 all over again and Gove faces his very own Portillo moment	Assertion
The Times	9. Changing fortunes drive young women's votes left and men's right	Assertion
The Times	10. How Putin's convict soldiers return as 'savages' to rape and kill again	Assertion
The Times	11. Joe Biden tries to woo female voters with abortion rights pledge	Assertion

As detailed in Table 4, the data analysis indicates that The Times headlines predominantly employ pragmatic elements of speech act. Notably, the speech act of assertion is more frequently used implicitly than explicitly. This could be seen in "Sure Start achieved its aims, then we threw it away" and "Keir Starmer 'would press the nuclear button'". Specifically, Table 4 shows that there are seven instances of implicitly used speech acts of assertion, whereas only one instance of explicitly used presuppositions of suggestion, request, invitation, and description is recorded.

Table 5. Implicature Elements Found in The Times Newspaper

Newspaper	Headline's Title	Implicature Element
The Times	1. UK general election poll tracker: who will win?	Generalised Conversational Implicature

The Times	2.	Elitism is what makes a club worth joining	Conventional Implicature
The Times	3.	Vaughan Gething: You look at my name, you don't think I'm black	Particularised Conversational Implicature
The Times	4.	It's not about the trainers, Rishi, it's just over	Particularised Conversational Implicature
The Times	5.	It's lawful for UK to keep selling weapons to Israel, says Oliver Dowden	Conventional Implicature
The Times	6.	A lesson for us all from Lulu: talent without graft is nothing	Generalised Conversational Implicature
The Times	7.	The Trial of Vladimir Putin by Geoffrey Robertson review — should Putin be put on trial for his invasion of Ukraine?	Generalised Conversational Implicature
The Times	8.	I didn't leave Russia — it left me, says dissident in Berlin	Particularised Conversational Implicature

Implicature is another prominent element in these headlines, employed both explicitly and implicitly to perform various speech acts. Table 5 shows that particularised conversational implicature followed by generalised conversational implicature are used more frequently, with a count of three for each. Conversely, conventional implicature is the least used, appearing only once in the headlines. The Times uses more implicit elements in their headlines than explicitly. The first headline is considered generalised conversational implicature because it implicates uncertainty about the election's outcome and invites readers to explore the content for predictions or analyses. Similar to number 6, it implies a general principle that talent alone is insufficient without hard work. The lesson drawn is broadly applicable beyond the specific example of Lulu.

Number 3 is considered as particularised conversational implicature due to the statement relying on specific contextual knowledge about stereotypes and assumptions related to names and race. It implies a mismatch between expectations based on name and actual identity. The same could be said about number 4 where it requires context to fully understand. It implies that the issue at hand (possibly political or personal) is beyond superficial concerns (like trainers), and a conclusion has been reached.

Headline number 5 was classified as the conventional implicature due to the phrase "It's lawful" suggests a legal permissibility which implies a controversial or debated practice. The context here relies on the conventional understanding of legality and morality.

Table 6. Presupposition Element Found in The Times Newspaper

Newspaper		Headline's Title	Presupposition Element
The Times	1.	Tax havens 'using every trick in the book' to avoid transparency	Existential Presupposition
The Times	2.	Gagging of the brave has let gender ideologues seize control	Existential Presupposition
The Times	3.	Post Office bosses 'feared career death' over failings, inquiry told — as it happened	Factive Presupposition
The Times	4.	George Galloway party candidate wrote of 'oppressed' Hamas killers	Existential Presupposition
The Times	5.	'A fine? We have nothing': what rough sleepers think of Tory plans	Existential Presupposition
The Times	6.	War on nimbyism: Keir Starmer targets voters who want more housing	Existential Presupposition
The Times	7.	'Broken' youth services need radical reform, says AO World boss	Factive Presupposition
The Times	8.	Exposed: hard-right European politicians 'on Putin's payroll'	Factive Presupposition
The Times	9.	India's 'ticking time bomb' as educated youth remain unemployed	Existential Presupposition
The Times	10.	'Secret meat eaters' force veggie delivery service to ditch green uniforms	Factive Presupposition:
The Times	11.	Binyamin Netanyahu 'to spare' Rafah's war refugees	Existential Presupposition

The most dominant presupposition found in the list of The Times headlines is existential presupposition with a frequency of 7, followed by 4 factive presupposition. The first headline is categorised as existential due to how it presupposes that tax havens exist and that there are recognised strategies they use to avoid transparency. The same goes for the second headline where it presupposes that there are brave individuals who are being gagged and that gender ideologues exist who have seized control. Meanwhile, headline number 3 presupposes that failings occurred and that Post Office bosses were afraid of the consequences for their careers. It could also be seen in number 7, which presupposes that youth services are indeed broken and need radical reform.

3.3 Interpretation of Findings

This study analyzed headlines from The Star (Malaysia) and The Times (UK) published between January and April 2024, focusing on the pragmatic elements used to convey

sensationalism. The analysis, based on Searle's taxonomy of speech acts, revealed three primary pragmatic elements: speech acts, implicatures, and presuppositions.

Table 7. Comparison of Pragmatic Elements

Newspaper	Speech Act	Implicature	Presupposition
The Star	23	2	5
The Times	11	8	11

3.3.1 Speech Acts

Both newspapers predominantly use assertive speech acts in their headlines. The Star's headlines, such as "Gold burns a hole in the pocket," create forceful, categorical statements. Similarly, The Times employs assertions like "Sure Start achieved its aims, then we threw it away" to elicit thought and emotion.

However, The Times demonstrates a broader range of speech acts, including descriptions, invitations, requests, and recommendations. For instance, "Crispy caterpillars, baffling ovens, and honeytrap buttocks" captivates readers with rich imagery, while "Want to stand for Reform? Pulse optional but do try to avoid Friday night tweets" engages readers humorously. In contrast, The Star employs less variation, with occasional directives like "Stop asking the same questions, judge tells Guan Eng's counsel."

3.3.2 Implicatures

The Star uses specific conversational implicatures, as seen in "Bella Astillah has a message for Ruhainies: 'Thank you.' Because of you, my children have lost their father," which relies on particular contexts to convey deeper meaning. The Times, however, frequently employs generalized conversational implicatures such as "UK general election poll tracker: who will win?" that depend on shared cultural understandings.

3.3.3 Presuppositions

Both publications use presuppositions to shape narratives and establish credibility. The Star often employs iterative presuppositions like "Fewer giving gold as gifts at weddings" and lexical presuppositions such as "Johor addresses sensitive matters in private to avoid uproar." The Times uses existential presuppositions, as in "Tax havens 'using every trick in the book' to avoid transparency," and factual presuppositions like "Post Office bosses 'feared career death' over failings, inquiry told — as it happened" to provide context and assert truth.

3.3.4 Comparative Analysis

The comparison reveals a purposeful use of pragmatic features tailored to each readership. While both newspapers rely heavily on assertions to capture readers' attention, The Times

employs a wider range of speech acts to engage readers with varied tones and implications. Both utilize implicature and presupposition to add depth and context, but The Times does so more extensively and frequently.

The Star tends to use more explicit news headlines compared to The Times, which primarily adopts a more implicit approach. The Times writers tend to use presupposition more frequently, often hiding context and assumptions within words rather than expressing them directly.

This comparative approach highlights how each newspaper constructs headlines that balance informativeness with engagement, playing crucial roles in shaping public discourse through sensationalism and effective communication. The study demonstrates significant differences in how Malaysian and UK media disseminate information through headlines, with The Star favoring assertive speech acts, while The Times employs all pragmatic qualities more evenly when reporting on current issues.

In conclusion, this analysis, applying Searle's Theory (1969; 1979) to examine pragmatic elements representing sensationalism in Malaysian and UK media headlines, enhances our understanding of cross-cultural differences in news communication strategies and their potential impact on readers' perceptions.

4. Discussion

This study employed an exploratory, descriptive, and contextual qualitative approach with a phenomenological perspective to analyze 30 headlines each from The Times and The Star's websites and Instagram pages. The research aimed to uncover pragmatic factors indicating sensationalism in newspaper headlines, compare sensationalism practices in Malaysian and UK publications, and investigate how pragmatic components contribute to sensationalized news.

Our findings reveal that both newspapers utilize pragmatic features in headlines to attract readers' attention and shape public opinion. The Star frequently employs assertions with specific implicatures and presuppositions to create appealing and provocative messages. In contrast, The Times demonstrates a more balanced approach in attracting attention and simplifying complex concepts through various linguistic devices.

The prevalent use of assertions in both newspapers aligns with previous research highlighting the effectiveness of categorical statements in quickly reporting news and capturing reader attention (Al-Saedi, 2020; Basera, 2023). This strategy reflects the newspapers' focus on maintaining reader interest and credibility through clear and persuasive communication.

The Times exhibited a wider range of speech acts compared to The Star, corroborating findings by Chiluwa (2017) and Elbah (2022) on the efficacy of varied language techniques in appealing to a broader audience. This diversity in speech acts illustrates a sophisticated approach to headline writing that aims to educate, entertain, and intrigue readers.

Both newspapers strategically employ implicatures, consistent with Grice's (1975) theory on indirect language's capacity to convey deeper meaning and stimulate reader engagement. The

Star's use of specific conversational implicatures in emotionally charged headlines aligns with Al-Azzawi's (2019) findings, while The Times' tendency towards generalized conversational implicatures supports Hassan's (2018) advocacy for inclusive audience selection in media.

These insights underscore the importance of considering pragmatic features in headline writing to create engaging content that encourages readership. The varied approaches of The Star and The Times offer valuable lessons for media practitioners in capturing reader attention within a changing media landscape.

This study contributes to the existing literature on media and communication by emphasizing the role of pragmatic characteristics in sensational newspaper headlines. By comparing The Star and The Times, this research enhances our understanding of how different newspapers employ language as a tool for effective journalism and audience engagement.

4.1 Conclusion

This study contributes significantly to the understanding of sensationalism in newspaper headlines through a cross-cultural comparative analysis of The Star (Malaysia) and The Times (UK). Through systematic examination of pragmatic elements in headlines across these distinct cultural contexts, several key findings emerge that advance both theoretical understanding and practical applications in journalism.

The research addresses a crucial gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence of how sensationalistic practices manifest differently across Western and Asian media contexts. Our findings demonstrate that while sensationalism is present in both contexts, its linguistic and pragmatic realizations are culturally specific, reflecting distinct journalistic traditions and societal values. This cross-cultural perspective enriches the scholarly discourse on media sensationalism and challenges the predominantly Western-centric understanding of sensationalistic practices in journalism.

Future research could extend this comparative framework to other cultural contexts and media platforms, particularly in the evolving digital media landscape. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how sensationalistic practices in headlines evolve over time in response to changing social and technological contexts.

This study ultimately advances our understanding of the complex relationship between media, culture, and communication, while providing practical insights for fostering more responsible and culturally aware journalistic practices.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Macrothink Institute.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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