

Article

Representation of the Citizen-initiated White Flag movement in Malaysian newspapers

Su-Hie Ting* & Angelina Nicollina Felix Hospi

Faculty of Education, Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak ,
4300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: suhieting@gmail.com, shting@unimas.my

Received: 17 August 2025

Accepted: 21 October 2025

Abstract: This study analysed Malaysian English and Malay newspaper coverage of the citizen-led White Flag (WF) movement using the Discourse Historical Approach. The movement involved people in need hanging a white cloth to request community aid. Analysis of 87 articles in 10 newspapers published in June–July 2021 showed that Malays were most frequently portrayed as needing help, followed by Chinese, Indians, Indigenous people and foreigners. Malay newspapers tended to depict more female recipients and male helpers compared to English newspapers. Across all newspapers, aid was mostly attributed to politicians, government agencies and individuals, and recipients were commonly framed as grateful but distressed rather than exploitative. Most articles legitimised WF as a timely citizen response, while a few highlighted abuse of aid. Minor counter-arguments questioned faith, government capability or personal resilience. Helper perspectives dominated over the voices of those in need. Newspapers used direct speech to personalise suffering and indirect speech to generalise collective responsibility. Modal verbs expressing mitigation and intensification appeared in almost equal measure, with Malay articles stressing duty while English reports conveyed contingency. The findings show how newspapers framed need, aid and responsibility through ethnic, gendered and moral lenses.

Keywords: #benderaputih; citizen initiative; social movement; White Flag; digital activism; COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

In late June 2021, more than a year after Malaysia's first COVID-19 lockdown on 18 March 2020, the #BenderaPutih (White Flag, WF) movement emerged as a grassroots response to worsening economic hardship. Citizens were encouraged to hang a white cloth outside their homes to signal distress, prompting neighbours to deliver food and essentials (The Straits Times, 2021). The movement began with a Facebook post by Nik Faizah Nik Othman on 28 June 2021, urging those in need to raise a white flag without shame. The hashtag quickly spread on Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), generating over 16,000 tweets within a day (Indramalar, 2021a). Influencers, community groups and ordinary citizens amplified the campaign, turning the white flag into a symbol of mutual aid and solidarity (Indramalar, 2021b). No formal organisation or leadership structure was identified in available sources, suggesting that WF functioned as a decentralised civic action.

Existing studies of Malaysian newspaper framing focus on protest politics rather than citizen-led aid movements during COVID-19 (Auethavornpipat & Tanyag, 2021; Bhowmik et al., 2025; Dermawan, 2021; Lai et al., 2022; Michael, 2025). Thus, it remains unclear how newspapers portrayed the WF movement. For

instance, did coverage highlight certain ethnic or gendered experiences of economic struggle? This question is significant in Malaysia's context of affirmative policies favouring the Malay majority. As WF differs from conventional protest-led social movements, examining its media framing is necessary to understand how citizen-initiated aid efforts are represented in mainstream and alternative press.

The study examined the coverage of the citizen-initiated WF movement in online English and Malay newspapers in Malaysia using the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). The specific objectives were to:

- i. examine the referents for people who flew the WF and people who gave assistance;
- ii. examine the evaluative attributions of people who flew the WF and people who gave assistance;
- iii. identify the arguments employed in newspaper articles about the WF movement;
- iv. determine the perspectives for the arguments in terms of point of view and distance; and
- v. determine the use of modal verbs for intensification and mitigation in newspaper articles on the WF movement.

Literature review

Unlike protest-based movements in Southeast Asia such as the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution (Lai et al., 2022) or Aung San Suu Kyi-linked demonstrations in Cambodia (Michael, 2025), the WF movement focusses on signalling need through a non-confrontational symbol rather than mass mobilisation. Media polarisation is common in contentious movements: liberal outlets frame protesters as heroic, while pro-government media depict them as disruptive (Bhowmik et al., 2025). Similar framing divides appeared globally, such as CNN versus CCTV in coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Wang et al., 2024) and competing portrayals of President Abbas's response to the US Embassy move to Jerusalem (Arandas et al., 2018).

In Malaysia, protest movements like Bersih faced state control, pushing civic expression into digital spaces (Dermawan, 2021). WF can thus be read as digital civic action, consistent with Dumitrica and Achterberg's (2017) definition of technology-enabled mobilisation. WF supplemented limited government aid through grassroots care and framed as citizens "taking matters into their own hands" (Edelenbos & van Meerkerk, 2016). Comparable cases include Thai civil society distributing food and COVID-19 relief in urban poor areas (Noinam et al., 2024; Pongutta et al., 2021), and community pantries in the Philippines, which were reported both as mutual aid and suspected opposition mobilisation (Auethavornpipat & Tanyag, 2021). By contrast, media in Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia emphasised civic mobilisation for disease control rather than direct social aid (Kwan, 2022; Prasetyo & Arif, 2021; Yuen et al., 2021).

Methodology

The descriptive study involved the analysis of articles on the WF movement from 10 English and Malay newspapers. Table 1 provides information on the names of newspapers and number of articles analysed, showing that 87 articles (53 English, 34 Malay) in nine newspapers were analysed. The hashtag #WhiteFlag / #BenderaPutih appeared in the articles themselves, not only on social media. Searches were conducted using the exact terms "White Flag", "White Flag campaign", "Bendera Putih" and "Kempen Bendera Putih", one at a time, across the platforms listed in Table 1. Only editorials and straight news reports, including wire stories, were included. Opinion pieces, syndicated commentary and duplicates were excluded. As the movement was short-lived, the timeframe was limited to June to July 2021, when coverage peaked. Searches were carried out on 1-8 October 2021.

Table 1. Number of WF articles in English and Malay newspapers analysed (N=87)

Language of newspaper	Name of newspaper	Number of articles analysed
English	Borneo Post	6
	News Straits Times	10
	Free Malaysia Today	15
	The Star	22
	Total	53

Malay	Berita Harian	7
	Harian Metro	4
	Astro Awani	6
	Kosmo	10
	Utusan Malaysia	7
Total		34

Note: The articles analysed were published in June to July 2021 and the search was conducted on 1-8 October 2021.

Articles on the WF movement were analysed using Reisigl and Wodak's (2017) DHA in terms of five discursive strategies (Table 2). For the mitigation and intensification strategies, the present study focusses on modal verbs.

Table 2. Analysis framework based on Reisigl and Wodak's (2017) DHA

Discursive strategy	Guiding question	Device	Example
Nomination	How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?	Deictics or words used to refer to persons. Anthroponyms or surnames. Metaphors. Metonymies or words with close association (e.g., turf and horse racing).	<u>The 29-year-old,</u>
Predication	What characteristics are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes? (E.g., Positive or negative traits of persons)	Nouns, adjectives, pronouns, appositions, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, conjunctive clauses, infinitive clauses, participial clauses, pronouns. Explicit comparison, similes. Allusions, presuppositions or implicatures.	<u>born without limbs</u> , has been selling nasi lemak for some years for his income.
Argumentation	What arguments are employed in the discourse in question? (E.g., justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness)	Fallacies or mistaken belief based on unsound arguments	There is no solution to it. How can you judge a person? <u>He has a need.</u> <u>We should not judge them.</u>
Perspectivisation	From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed? (E.g., point of view, distance)	Deictics Direct or indirect speech* Quotation marks, discourse markers, particles Metaphors Personal pronouns	This help means a lot to <u>me</u> ," she said when met today
Intensification, mitigation	Are the respective utterances articulated overtly; are they intensified or mitigated? (i.e. Modifying the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances)	Modal verbs*	However, I still <u>need</u> to pay RM350 a month for my rented room in Cheras.

Note: *Focus in the present study

Source: Adapted from Reisigl and Wodak (2017)

The unit of analysis is the article, and coding followed the coding book in Table 2, which includes examples for each strategy. For nomination, every mention of the helped and helpers by name or reference (e.g., "the bakery owner", "she") was counted. Ethnicity and gender were identified based on names and pronouns. In Malay names, bin and binti, and in Indian names, a/l and a/p, indicate gender, although a few names were unisex. Gender could not be determined for five individuals, explaining the difference between the totals for ethnicity (76) and gender (71) in Table 4.

For predication, the focus was on the evaluative language used to describe social actors. The traits attributed to the helped and the helpers were coded as either positive (e.g., caring, responsible, grateful) or

negative (e.g., exploitative, irresponsible, attention-seeking), allowing patterns of moral positioning to be identified.

Third, for argumentation, both fallacies and logical arguments or justifications for claims of truth and normative rightness were coded. For a phrase or statement to be an argumentation strategy, two elements need to be present to persuade: topos (topic of argument) and reasoning to justify claims of truth and normative rightness. For example, “people in need should not be ashamed to signal that they have problems (topos: moral duty) so that their community can provide relief (reasoning)”.

Fourth, perspectivisation was analysed to determine point of view and distance. Direct speech and first-person quotations were coded as reducing distance between readers and actors, while third-person narration and indirect speech were coded as creating distance through journalistic mediation. Each instance was coded in context, noting whether the perspective was that of the helped or the helper.

Fifth, intensification and mitigation were examined through modal verbs only, due to the volume of data. Table 3 lists the predefined lemmatized set (e.g., can/could, will/would). Coding was context-driven because forms like cannot (*tidak dapat*) function to intensify rather than mitigate, as in: “*Kami tidak dapat melakukan ini sendiri ... kami memerlukan kerjasama masyarakat*” (“We cannot do this ourselves... we need the cooperation of the community”).

Table 3. Modal verbs for mitigation and intensification

Modal verb	Conventional use for mitigation	Unusual use for intensification
Can/ <i>boleh</i>	Ability or possibility → mitigates by lowering certainty (e.g., “The platform can be easily accessed”).	Intensification if used as strong permission/authorisation (e.g., “You can and must do this”).
Could	Polite/less forceful than can (e.g., “He could earn RM60 ...”).	Intensification if used for strong past ability (e.g., “He could easily give up”).
May	Permission or weak possibility (e.g., “They may have lost their jobs”).	Intensification if framed as near-certainty (e.g., “This may well be the solution”).
Might	Very tentative possibility (hedge). (e.g., “you might find yourself finishing ...”).	Rarely intensifying, but “might well” can heighten likelihood. (e.g., You might as well admit you need help”).
Would	Hypothetical, polite softener (e.g., “The police would stop us to check ...”).	Intensification when used as habitual certainty (e.g., “They would always do that”).
Should/ <i>patut</i>	Advisory, less forceful than must → mitigates obligation (e.g., “People should send out a white flag ...”) In both deontic and epistemic senses, should usually downscales the illocutionary force: Deontic: advice/suggestion rather than directive (“You should try ...”). Epistemic: probability/expectation rather than certainty (“It should work ...”).	Intensification when emphatically reinforced using adverbs of circumstances to strengthen persuasion (E.g., “You really should not feel embarrassed to admit you need help”).
Modal verb	Conventional use for intensification	Unusual use for mitigation
Must/ <i>mesti</i>	Strong obligation or necessity (e.g., “We must act”).	Mitigation if used in rhetorical/conditional sense to show aspiration (E.g., “If we are to succeed, we must try”).
Will	Certainty or strong prediction (“Each order will be donated to an organisation”).	Mitigation when softened for politeness (“I will just mention...”).
Shall	Formal obligation or prediction. (“We shall do our best to help them”).	Mitigation in legal/religious discourse where softened by convention.
Need/ <i>perlu</i>	Strong necessity (“... number of people who need food aid and necessities”).	Mitigation if framed hypothetically (“If needed ...”).
Cannot/ <i>Tidak boleh/tidak dapat</i>	Strong prohibition (“Even then, we cannot identify everyone who needs aid”).	
<i>Mahu</i>	Strong volition/intention. Speaker emphasizes determination, strengthening illocutionary force. (E.g., “Mereka mahu sediakan platform yang mudah ...”).	Mitigation if used to soften directives or make obligation optional by framing them as “want” rather than obligation. (E.g., Kalau kamu mahu, bolehlah ikut.”)

<i>Hendak</i>	Determination or planned future action that is firm, deliberate and inevitable. (E.g., Cuma saya buntu memikirkan di mana hendak cari pendapatan.”	Mitigation if used conditionally or hypothetically to add tentativeness, lessen obligation or portray intention as contingent. (E.g., “Hendak kalau boleh, kami cuba bantu.”
---------------	--	--

Examples are our own.

“Need” is a semi-modal verb and in Malay linguistics, “mahu” and “hendak” (meaning want) are generally treated as modals and called *kata bantu ragam*” (Jalis & Rahim, 2014).

Both researchers conducted the DHA analyses for The Star independently and discussed discrepancies. In the initial stage, the second researcher missed several mentions of helpers and helped. The second researcher coded the remaining articles, and the first researcher verified all codes. Only 21 instances of “need” and “perlu” were missed (7.7% of 272 modal verbs). Formal reliability statistics were not applied, as DHA prioritises context-driven interpretation over mechanical coding.

The Findings

This section describes the results for the five objectives of the study. In this paper, the people who flew the WF to ask for help are referred to as “the helped” while the people who gave assistance are referred to as “the helpers”.

1. Referents of the Helped and the Helpers

Table 4 shows that most WF articles featured Malays (65.8% of 76 instances) as the helped, with fewer mentions of Chinese (14.5%), Indian (7.9%), Indigenous (2.6%), or foreign individuals (9.2%). Most featured Malays, possibly reflecting the group’s larger population share (52.8%) in Malaysia (The World Factbook, 2024), rather than ethnic bias.

Table 4. Ethnic and gender profile of “the helped” in the WF newspaper articles

Demographic information		English newspapers		Malay newspapers		Total	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Ethnic Group N=76 instances	Malay	21	27.6	29	38	50	65.8
	Chinese	6	7.9	5	7	11	14.5
	Indian	4	5.3	2	3	6	7.9
	Indigenous	2	2.6	0	0	2	2.6
	Foreigner	7	9.2	0	0	7	9.2
Gender N=71 instances	Female	14	19.7	20	28.2	34	47.9
	Male	20	28.2	17	23.9	37	52.1

*The total number for gender and ethnic group do not tally because there were five instances where the gender could not be determined

Gender representation of the helped was relatively balanced: 37 men (or 47.9% of 71 instances) and 34 women (51.1%) (Table 4). English newspapers highlighted more men (28.2%) than women (19.7%) in need; Malay papers featured more women (28.2%) than men (23.9%). The women were often described as housewives during the lockdown. Before the pandemic, these women held various jobs such as factory workers or small business owners. The men worked in diverse occupations including music, transport, and food services.

As for helpers (Table 5), there were 122 instances of ethnicity being mentioned and 48 instances of gender. Most helpers (66.4%) were Malay, followed by Chinese helpers (25.4%) but no foreigners mentioned. While not all netizens provided physical aid, some of them defended the right of people to seek help, countering criticisms from political and religious figures. Based on their online pseudonyms, they were Malays. Occupations were sometimes reported in the articles but this is beyond the scope of the present study.

Table 5. Ethnic and gender profile of people of the helpers in the WF articles

Demographic information		English newspapers		Malay newspapers		Total	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Ethnic Group N=122 instances	Malay	52	42.6	29	23.8	81	66.4
	Chinese	22	18.0	9	7.4	31	25.4
	Indian	5	4.1	2	1.6	7	5.7
	Indigenous	2	1.6	1	0.8	3	2.5
	Foreigner	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Gender N=48 instances	Female	16	33.3	3	6.2	19	39.6
	Male	5	10.4	24	19.7	29	60.4

*The total number for gender and ethnic group do not tally because three races were mentioned without gender identification

Newspaper articles portrayed more male helpers (60.4%) than female (39.6%) out of 48 mentions, suggesting a patriarchal framing. This tendency was most pronounced in Malay newspapers, which highlighted male helpers (19.7%) far more than female helpers (6.2%). In contrast, English newspapers featured more women (33.3%) than men (10.4%) in their coverage of assistance. Helpers were typically identified by their roles or names, with frequent mention of politicians, government agencies, ministries, companies and netizens. NGOs, neighbourhood committees, religious bodies, village heads, ministers and members of parliament were referenced as official or community figures offering help, while companies and online individuals were often named directly. The Star distinguished itself by foregrounding contributions from businesses, celebrities, social influencers and authors, suggesting a more lifestyle-oriented framing of civic response. In comparison, Free Malaysia Today placed stronger attention on Muslim religious leaders, reflecting a moral framing of aid and responsibility in relation to the movement.

2. Evaluative Attributions of The Helped and The Helpers

In Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) DHA, characteristics assigned to social actors illustrate predication strategies. Positive evaluations of the helped frequently appeared through direct speech, such as an Indian single mother who said the aid "means a lot to me" and a disabled Chinese hawker who was "touched and grateful." "Grateful" was repeatedly used to describe recipients' feelings, reflecting journalistic framing. Negative labels were rare and mostly limited to terms like "poor." Some accounts mentioned families surviving on plain rice for days before raising the flag. Emotional distress was conveyed through expressions like "*tertekan sangat*" (very stressed), "*risau*" (worried) and "*keperitan*" (in difficulty). Acknowledging the stigma of seeking aid, many reports urged those in need to "fly a white flag." Only a few articles out of 87 depicted the helped negatively. One such case involved an individual in Johor Baru who made demanding and rude requests and threatened to shame helpers online. Helpers received indirect praise, with positive attributions implied rather than stated. There was a restaurant owner who retained staff at personal cost, reflecting silent altruism without seeking recognition.

Excerpt 1

"The person specifically asked for a large bottle of 100 Plus, bubble tea with gula melaka and no ice, as well as spicy chicken chop. "The person also asked for Korean spicy noodles saying that he hasn't had it for a very long time," said Liang. When he replied to the message the following morning, the person responded sarcastically: "I would have died of hunger if I had waited for your food to arrive." (The Star, 9 July 2021)

3. Arguments employed in WF newspaper articles

The analysis revealed five arguments: WF as timely citizen response, abuse of aid, lack of faith, doubts about government, and self-doubt. Most articles (83.9%) framed WF as a timely citizen response (Table 6). Excerpt 2 shows a plea for help to feed pets.

Table 6. Frequency and percentage of arguments employed in WF newspaper articles (N=87)

Newspaper	Total number of articles	Timely citizen response	Abuse of help rendered	Lack of faith	Doubt government capability	Doubt own capability
Awani	6	5	1			
Berita Harian	7	7				
Utusan	7	6		1		
Kosmo	10	8		1		1
Harian Metro	4	4				
All BM	34	30 (34.5%)	1 (1.1%)	2 (2.3%)	0	1 (1.1%)
Borneo Post	6	6				
New Straits Time	10	9	1			
Free Malaysia Today	15	12	1		2	
The Star	22	16	6			
All English	53	43 (49.4%)	8 (9.2%)	0	2 (2.3%)	0
Total	87	73 (83.9%)	9 (10.3%)	2 (2.3%)	2 (2.3%)	1 (1.1%)

Excerpt 2

Malaysians have initiated a social media campaign named the #benderaputih movement, calling those in need of food or essentials to raise a white flag outside their homes, while the Malaysia Animal Association urged pet owners who need food for their dogs and cats to put up a red flag outside their homes. (New Straits Time, 10 July 2021)

A second argument for the WF movement is the occasional reports of abuse of the help rendered to the needy, accounting for 10.3% of 87 newspaper articles. Excerpt 3 highlights how some helpers remained empathetic, urging patience even when aid was misused. Newspapers like New Straits Times reinforced this by noting recipients often removed the white flag after receiving help. Though framed through quotes, journalists shape these narratives by selecting voices that highlight responsible behaviour and dedication.

Excerpt 3

"There is no solution to it. How can you judge a person? He has a need. We should not judge them. "This will discourage more from doing such work, and the ones who are really in need will suffer," he said, adding that those new to these activities should learn to be patient over this issue." (The Star, 21 July 2021)

A second argument present in 10.3% of articles was the abuse of aid. Excerpt 4 shows helpers urging patience even when help was misused. Newspapers like New Straits Times noted that recipients often removed the flag after receiving aid, reinforcing responsibility. Though framed through quotes, journalists shaped narratives by selecting voices emphasising dedication. Political opportunism also surfaced. Astro Awani and Berita Harian reported Eddie Hamid's "Bendera Putih" song, meant to highlight suffering. He objected when politicians' photos were added to the video, fearing misuse. Coverage framed him as a moral voice defending the movement's humanitarian roots, subtly critiquing political visibility attempts.

Thirdly, a religious argument against WF appeared in two Malay newspapers, Utusan and Kosmo, suggesting that flying the white flag signalled weak faith. PAS MP Nik Mohamad Abduh and religious leader Wan Mohd Salim voiced this on July 2, 2021 (Excerpt 4), warning against the "devil's deception." This framing aimed to discourage public association of WF with desperation, asserting the idea that Muslims should rely solely on God. However, the following day, Religious Affairs Minister Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri stated that those in need deserve help "white flag or not". Free Malaysia Today highlighted his remarks as a rebuttal

to the earlier religious criticisms, positioning him as a compassionate counter-voice. By quoting him in the headline, the article legitimised the WF movement as morally acceptable and socially responsible. This contrast in reported views revealed a subtle divide within religious leadership, between those framing WF as a lapse in faith and those framing it as a valid cry for community support.

Excerpt 4

KOTA BHARU: Nik Mohamad Abduh berkata, sebahagian perkara viral diakui memberi kebaikan, namun beliau juga yakin, sebahagian besarnya adalah hasutan dan tipu daya iblis yang mendorong kepada kenistaan, kebencian dan pelecehan sesama insan. “Janganlah ketika Allah menurunkan bencana COVID-19, Allah juga mengangkat akhlak, adab dan susila daripada kita semua. Terus menelusuri sunnah nabi,” katanya.

(Translated: KOTA BHARU: Nik Mohamad Abduh said that some of the viral things are acknowledged to be good, but he is also convinced that most of them are incitement and deception of the devil that leads to hatred, hatred and abuse of fellow human beings. “Don’t let it be that when God brings down the COVID-19 disaster, God also lifts our character, manners and morals. Keep following the sunnah of the prophet,” he said.) (Utusan, 2 July 2021).

The fourth argument against WF questioned either the government’s ability to care for citizens or people’s own resilience. Reported in two Free Malaysia Today articles, the Kedah chief minister framed the initiative as political propaganda that “tarnished the good work of the federal government” (Excerpt 5). On 15 July 2021, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin dismissed the movement, urging people to hang blue flags instead and implying many were not truly in need. His remarks drew backlash, with MP Charles Santiago calling him “a delusional prime minister” disconnected from the rakyat (Excerpt 6). As the highest authority, his dismissal likely contributed to the movement’s decline, seen in reduced media coverage by late July 2021, alongside the rollout of RM4.6 billion aid in August.

Excerpt 5

It was reported yesterday that Kedah menteri besar Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor described the white flag initiative as a form of political propaganda aimed at tarnishing the good work of the federal government”. (Free Malaysia Today, 2 July 2021)

Excerpt 6

PETALING JAYA: Speaking to reporters after visiting a food aid distribution centre in Putrajaya, Muhyiddin said “it’s okay to hang a blue flag” (in apparent reference to Perikatan Nasional’s colours) and added that he thought that “if we go to the ground, we will probably find the kitchens of homes to be full (with supplies)”. “I think we have a delusional Prime Minister who is quite divorced from what’s happening on the ground,” said Klang MP Charles Santiago”. (Free Malaysia Today, 15 July 2021)

The final argument against the WF is that people should not doubt their own capability to take care of themselves, published in a Malay newspaper (Kosmo). A celebrity entrepreneur was quoted as saying “*Usaha, jangan nak malas, harap bantuan bendera putih sahaja*”, that is, work hard, don’t be lazy, hope for White Flag help only. However, this is a small percentage of WF newspaper articles (1.1%) compared to the majority (83.9%) which lauded the WF movement as giving timely help to those badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

4. Perspectives for the Arguments in Terms of Point of View and Distance

This section examines perspectivisation and distance. Table 7 shows that most articles (56.3%) were written from the helper’s perspective, while 32.2% reflected the helped. Focusing on helpers served to recognise and affirm their efforts. Only 11.5% of articles included both viewpoints, allowing the coverage to reflect both the experiences of those in need and the contributions of those offering assistance.

Table 7. Frequencies and percentages of point of view and reported speech in WF newspaper articles

Newspaper	Total number of articles	Point of view (N=87 articles)			Reported Speech (N=87 articles)	
		The Helped	The Helper	Both	Direct speech	Indirect speech
Awani	6	3	4	2	6	6
Berita Harian	7	1	3		7	7
Utusan	7	3	7	3	7	7
Kosmo	10	2	2		10	10
Harian Metro	4	3	4		4	4
All Malay	34	10 (11.5%)	19 (21.8%)	5 (5.7%)	34 (39.1%)	34 (39.1%)
Borneo Post	6	1	4	1	6	6
New Straits Time	10	7	3		10	10
Free Malaysia Today	15	7	8		15	15
The Star	22	3	15	4	20	22
All English	53	18 (20.7%)	30 (34.5%)	5 (5.7%)	51 (58.6%)	53 (60.9%)
Total	87	28 (32.2%)	49 (56.3%)	10 (11.5%)	85 (97.7%)	87 (100%)

Results are reported on how reported speech (direct and indirect speech) are used to convey distance. Almost all (97.7% of 87 articles) used both direct and indirect speech to report WF news, except for two The Star articles. In the direct speech, the use of first-person pronouns lessened the distance with the newspaper readers. Both English and Malay newspapers used first- and third-person pronouns to frame the experiences of the helped. Individuals commonly used “I” for themselves and “we/us” to represent their families. For instance, one Kosmo article featured M. Dewgi, a 66-year-old single mother, and her disabled son. Dewgi’s direct quote “This help means a lot to me” conveyed gratitude toward Malaysians of all races. The article also named local donors and authorities who gave aid such as Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (KRT) Pekan Gemencheh and the politician, Datuk Mohd. Isam Mohd Isa. Indirect speech was used to explain Dewgi’s circumstances, usually accompanied by the use of third-person pronouns (“she,” “they”), This shift from direct to indirect speech and first- to third-person creates a narrative arc, zooming in to personalise their struggle and zooming out to contextualise it within broader need. This balance helps frame the story as part of a collective social issue rather than an isolated case.

Articles highlighting helpers’ kindness balance distance using direct and indirect speech where Adibah Noor’s prayer and tweet (“We have each other”) are quoted and paraphrased. There was little “us” versus “them” framing, except in reports of aid abuse. For example, Food Bank Malaysia used “he” and “them” to distinguish helpers from lower-income recipients (“they find the racks empty”).

5. Intensification and Mitigation in Newspaper Articles on the WF Movement

This section presents the frequencies and percentages of modal verbs used to either intensify or mitigate illocutionary force (Table 8), alongside qualitative observations about references to the helped and helpers. Mitigation modals include can, could, may, would, should, *boleh* and *dapat*, while intensification modals include will, cannot, need, need not, *perlu*, *tidak perlu*, *hendak*, *mahu* and related negations. Overall, mitigation accounted for 51.8% of 272 instances, while intensification made up 48.1%. Malay articles used more intensification (9.9%) than mitigation (5.1%), whereas English articles showed the opposite pattern (38.2% and 46.7%). This indicates that Malay reporting projected obligation and certainty, while English reports used more hedging and conditionality. These linguistic choices reflect differing media stances on urgency, duty and cautious empathy in covering the movement.

Table 8. Frequencies and percentages of modal verbs for mitigation and intensification of illocutionary force (N=272 instances)

Newspaper	Total number of articles	Mitigation	Intensification	Total
Awani	6	2	7	9
Berita Harian	7	0	3	3
Utusan	7	2	2	4
Kosmo	10	8	10	18
Harian Metro	4	2	5	7
All Malay	34	14 (5.1%)	27 (9.9%)	41 (15%)
Borneo Post	6	21	5	26
New Straits Time	10	8	17	25
Free Malaysia Today	15	32	25	57
The Star	22	66	57	123
All English	53	127 (46.7)	104 (38.2%)	231 (84.9%)
Total	87	141 (51.8%)	131 (48.1%)	272 (99.9%)*

Note: *The total is not 100% due to rounding off

For the helped, “should” (“*patut*”) was more common than “need” (“*perlu*”), expressing encouragement to seek help and not be ashamed. “Need” conveyed necessity, especially regarding the elderly or sick. Similarly, helpers used “should” to urge action, such as reporting WF sightings or protecting the dignity of the helped. Malay newspapers occasionally used “*tidak patut*” (should not), criticising those who encouraged giving up, showing that not all supported the WF movement. “Should” also promoted empathy among helpers, asking them to avoid judgment. Notably, the strong modal verb “must” appeared only in relation to helpers. For example, food bank owner Moses Sin emphasised that helpers “must space themselves” due to overwhelming need and limited resources. These modal verbs reflect both emotional intensity and moral responsibility embedded in the discourse surrounding the WF movement.

Mitigation strategies involving “can/could” and “may” softened statements about the helped. These verbs expressed possibility, inability, or limited capacity, evoking sympathy and realism without overstating hardship such as “he can’t afford to pay” and “help as much as I can”. This reduces assertiveness and avoids overgeneralisation, allowing for cautious acknowledgment of those needing help. In WF news reports, “would” often signals intention but also appears in hypothetical or counterfactual contexts to soften claims such as “I would have died of hunger” is a hyperbolic complaint. The contrast between intensifying and mitigating strategies in WF news highlights the helped’s internal conflict seeking aid versus preserving pride and frames the helpers’ willingness and potential actions through modals, balancing empathy, uncertainty, and commitment.

Discussion

The DHA analysis of WF coverage in English and Malay newspapers revealed two key insights. First, gender and ethnicity were assigned different levels of salience. Malay newspapers tended to depict women as helpless and men as rescuers, reflecting patriarchal norms, whereas English newspapers presented a more balanced portrayal. Male figures appeared more frequently overall, consistent with Hawes and Thomas (1995), suggesting continued male-centred framing in Malaysian news. This highlights the need for more gender-sensitive reporting.

Second, even a humanitarian initiative like WF was narrated through Malaysia’s racialised social landscape. Malays were most visible among both the helped and the helpers, reflecting real socioeconomic disparities: in 2019, poverty affected 7.2% of Bumiputera, 4.8% of Indians and 1.4% of Chinese (Zulkifli, 2023). Although no group was negatively portrayed, the emphasis on Malay hardship aligns with national

discourse on poverty and affirmative action, showing how humanitarian narratives are still shaped by existing social hierarchies.

In the broader landscape of social media-driven initiatives, the short lifespan of the WF campaign mirrors other leaderless efforts that fade without organised support (Jeffreys & Xu, 2017). Newspapers initially fostered solidarity and purpose (Arai & Pedlar, 1997) but later accelerated the movement's decline. By amplifying elite criticism and politicising a grassroots call for compassion, media coverage shifted the narrative from community care to political contestation, weakening public momentum.

Conclusion

This DHA study of WF coverage showed that the four Malaysian newspapers initially legitimised, then delegitimised the movement, reflecting how media language enacts power, identity, and control. The analysis highlights how even humanitarian initiatives are shaped by political narratives and elite intervention, demonstrating the influence of newspapers in both mobilising and silencing citizen-led efforts. A limitation of this study is its two-month focus and reliance on inferred ethnicity from names. The linguistic analysis also centred only on modal verbs. Future work should examine how WF frames circulated on social media to understand audience reception and whether digital discourse sustained or resisted newspaper narratives. For newsroom practice, the findings point to the need for more gender-sensitive and ethnically inclusive reporting. For policy, they suggest recognising and supporting citizen-led aid initiatives as legitimate complements to government welfare rather than treating them as political challenges.

Acknowledgement: The authors would like to thank Associate Professor Dr Collin Jerome for introducing us to Discourse Historical Approach.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Arai, S. M., & Pedlar, A. M. (1997). Building communities through leisure: Citizen participation in a healthy communities initiative. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 29(2), 167-182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.1997.11949792>
- Arandas, M. F., Chang, P. K., Mohamad, E. M. W., & Idid, S. A. (2018). Framing the reaction of President Abbas on the issue of moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. *e-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 15(5), 181-192. <https://doi.org/10.17613/9n0x-bc95>
- Auethavornpipat, R., & Tanyag, M. (2021). Protests and pandemics: civil society mobilisation in Thailand and the Philippines during COVID-19. *New Mandala*. <https://www.newmandala.org/protests-and-pandemics-civil-society-mobilisation-in-thailand-and-the-philippine/>
- Bhowmik, M. K., Kennedy, K. J., Chan, A. H. T., & Gube, J. C. C. (2025). "Heroes and Villains": Media constructions of minoritized groups in Hong Kong's season of discontent. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 60(3), 1353-1371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231192326>
- Dermawan, A. (2021, January 7). *Signature campaign to reinstate 4 infrastructure projects for Penang [NSTTV]*. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2021/01/655316/signature-campaign-reinstate-4-infrastructure-projects-penang-nsttv>
- Dumitrica, D., & Achterberg, E. (2017). Digital activism and the civic subject position: A study of the Ons Geld (Our Money) citizen initiative in the Netherlands. *Paper presented at 2017 International Conference for E-Democracy and Open Government*. <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/8046288>
- Edelenbos, J., & van Meerkerk, I. (Eds.). (2016). Critical reflections on interactive governance. Edward Elgar. doi:10.4337/9781783479078
- Free Malaysia Today. (2021, July 2). Dr M gives green light for white flag campaign. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/07/02/dr-m-gives-green-light-for-white-flag-campaign/>

- Free Malaysia Today (2021, July 15). MPs, netizens slam Muhyiddin over white flag snub. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/07/15/mps-netizens-slam-muhyiddin-over-white-flag-snub/>
- Hawes, T., & Thomas, S. (1995). Language bias against women in British and Malaysian newspapers. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 18(2), 1-18.
- Indramalar, S. (2021a, June 29). *White flag movement pledging aid goes viral on social media*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/06/29/white-flag-movement-pledging-aid-goes-viral-on-social-media?>
- Indramalar, S. (2021b, June 30). White flag: Mooted by Malaysians for Malaysians in need. The Star. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/06/30/white-flag-mooted-by-malaysians-for-malaysians-in-need>
- Jalis, F. M. M., & Rahim, N. A. (2014). Contrastive analysis of German and Malay modal verbs. *Asian Social Science*, 10(6), 81–88. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v10n6p81>.
- Jeffreys, E., & Xu, J. (2017). Celebrity-inspired, Fan-driven: Doing philanthropy through social media in Mainland China. *Asian Studies Review*, 41(2), 244-262. [https://DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2017.1294145](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2017.1294145)
- Kwan, J. Y. (2022). ‘Democracy and active citizenship are not just about the elections’: Youth civic and political participation during and beyond Singapore’s nine-day pandemic election (GE2020). *Young*, 30(3), 247-264. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/11033088211059595>
- Lai, K. M. L., Ong, T. W. S., & Ting, S. H. (2022). Sign of the times: Framing the grievances of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 16(3), 61-82. <http://www.ijls.net/pages/volume/vol16no3.html>
- Michael, E. (2025). Aung San Suu Kyi & The speech at Shwedagon Pagoda. *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*, 13(1), Article 18.
- Noinam, S., Piaseu, N., Junda, T., Tantiprasoplap, S., Kraithaworn, P., Krongthaeo, S., ... & Srisuk, W. (2024). Civil society involvement in managing the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of a large and congested urban community in Bangkok, Thailand. *Health Equity*, 8(1), 269-278. [https://doi: 10.1089/heq.2023.0215](https://doi.org/10.1089/heq.2023.0215)
- Pongutta, S., Kantamaturapoj, K., Phakdeesettakun, K., & Phonsuk, P. (2021). The social impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on urban slums and the response of civil society organisations: A case study in Bangkok, Thailand. *Heliyon*, 7(5), e07161. [https://doi:10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07161](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07161)
- Prasetyo, K., & Arif, L. (2021). Civil society participation in efforts to prevent the spread COVID-19. *Jurnal Administrasi Publik (Public Administration Journal)*, 11(1), 22-31. <https://doi.org/10.31289/jap.v11i1.4118>
- Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2017). The discourse-historical approach. In J. Flowerdew, & J. E. Richardson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (pp. 87-121). Routledge.
- The World Factbook. (2024, July 8). Explore all countries: Malaysia. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/malaysia/#people-and-society>
- Utusan (2021, July 2). Bendera putih: Nik Abduh akui ramai marah, ‘viral bukan panji kebenaran’. <https://www.utusan.com.my/terkini/2021/07/bendera-putih-nik-abduh-pertahan-kenyataan/>
- Wang, Y., Sannusi, S. N., & Abd Kadir, S. (2024). News framing of the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict: A comparative analysis of CNN (USA) and CCTV (China) from a war and peace journalism perspective. *e-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 21(4), 346-356.
- Yuen, S., Cheng, E. W., Or, N. H., Grépin, K. A., Fu, K. W., Yung, K. C., & Yue, R. P. (2021). A tale of two city-states: A comparison of the state-led vs civil society-led responses to COVID-19 in Singapore and Hong Kong. *Global Public Health*, 16(8-9), 1283-1303. [https://doi: 10.1080/17441692.2021.1877769](https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.1877769)
- Zulkifli, A. M. (2023, March 7). *Most hardcore poor from Bumiputera community, says Rafizi*. <https://www.malaysianow.com/news/2023/03/07/most-hardcore-poor-from-bumiputera-community-says-rafizi>