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# **The Narrative of Human Suffering: Using Automated Semantic Tagging to Analyse News Articles and Public Attitudes towards the MH370 Air Tragedy**

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## **Abstract**

Narratives about death and loss require sensitivity and handling with care. However, the influence of the specific language employed within such narratives is not well understood. To help address this gap, this paper details the findings of two complementary studies comparing and contrasting the relationship between English language users and the media in Malaysia and the UK with regards to the narrative of human suffering. Specifically, study 1 examined the ways in which the 2014 Malaysian Airline MH370 air tragedy is linguistically defined and constructed in a number of newspapers in Malaysia and the UK. Study 2 explored 50 Malaysian and 50 UK students' attitudes towards the tragedy through the analysis of keyword responses. In order to avoid occurrence of subjectivity in grouping the keywords, within both studies, we used the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS) to calculate semantic categories. The findings of study 1 suggest an overall tendency within UK newspapers to construct simplistic binary classifications of 'capable us' and 'incapable others' whereas the Malaysian broadsheets frequently highlighted the Malaysian authorities' expert management of the crisis. By contrast, both Malaysian and UK students' attitudinal responses demonstrated a greater depth of emotional engagement with the tragedy through the use of affective language.

**Keywords:** language attitudes, semantic categories, keywords, MH370

## **Introduction**

Media representations of human suffering do not merely consist of a body of texts. They also constitute cultural practices in which audience responses to mediated suffering can shape future versions of narratives (Chouliaraki, 2006). For this reason, analysing mediated suffering can help determine the ways in which news texts build public ethics, and principally by shaping audience encounters with distant suffering. In addition, this analysis can also help reveal the ways, and extent to which, one can - or should - act on the mediated events of suffering, e.g. in terms of one's local or global social structures and power relations (Joye, 2012). For the purposes of the present study, distant suffering refers to 'moral and political issues for the spectator who cannot act directly to affect the circumstances in which the suffering takes place' (Boltanski, 1999; Joye, 2012). Local suffering implies the opposite – a reality for those directly involved or affected by the event.

In the present study, we examine narratives of human suffering, both within the media and amongst the general public, with regard to the March 2014 Malaysian Airline MH370 tragedy, one of the deadliest incidents in Malaysia's airline history. The subsequent multi-nation search for the missing airplane was also among the costliest in human history (US\$70 million)<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, Study 1 investigated the ways in which the air tragedy was portrayed within selected Malaysian newspapers, as representative of English employed within the outer circle and, by contrast, within several UK newspapers, as representative of inner circle English use (Kachru, 1985).

To provide a more comprehensive analysis of the narrative of human suffering, an additional attitudinal study was also undertaken amongst university students in Malaysia and the UK. This study investigated potential differences between Malaysian and UK students' perceptions of the ways in which they experienced the MH370 tragedy. It is considered that the exploration of perceptions of the MH370 air tragedy can offer insights into the specific

choices students make in their narrations of human suffering and, in turn, offer information regarding how students from different nations feel about suffering.

### **The use of English in Malaysia and the UK newspapers**

In Malaysia, the official language is Malay and English is learnt as a second language (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). The importance of the English language in Malaysia is influenced by the fact that Malaysia was under British rule from the 18th to 20th centuries. During this period, the English language was promoted through education and the language was considered to be both politically and economically important (Thirusanku & Yunus, *ibid*). This importance is evidenced by the fact that more than forty English language newspapers were published in the Malay peninsula in the 19th century (Mohd Sani, 2009). These newspapers published by the British colonial administration to serve British interests and for business purposes, include *The Malacca Observer*, *The Perak Pinoor* and, in particular, *The New Straits Times (NST)*, which is still printed today (Thirusanku & Yunus, *ibid*).

We analysed the content of Malaysian and UK English newspapers to investigate the construction of the Malaysian Airlines tragedy for a number of reasons. Firstly, whereas English functions as the L1 for the vast majority of UK nationals, it is typically acquired as a second language in Malaysia. Indeed, the forms of English employed in the UK and the English forms used in Malaysia are linguistically very different in both speech and writing forms (Pillai & Ong, 2018).

Secondly, we considered that differences in the social structure between Malaysia and the UK may be pertinent to our investigation. Specifically, within Malaysia, it is thought that high value is ascribed to collectivism (Tafarodi, & Smith, 2001). By contrast, within the UK - alongside Australia and the USA – it is considered that high value is ascribed to individualism (Lochtman & Kappel, 2008). Van Dijk (2008) notes that such cultural values

mean that different cultures thus structure written and spoken discourse in different ways. Any differences between written discourse structures would likely be reflected within newspaper texts.

### **Empirical Research on Human Suffering and its Media Coverage**

A substantial body of research has focused on the communicative role of news media in the construction of suffering and disaster. Examples include: UK newspaper reporting of floods in the developed and developing world (e.g., Solman & Henderson, 2019), the consistency of the US news coverage on 292 global natural disasters from 2004 to 2014 (e.g., Yan & Bissell, 2018), US and UK news coverage of the 2011 Great East Japan disaster (e.g., Matthews, 2019), the emergence of political discourse related to crises (e.g., Boltanski, 1999) and strategies of disaster resilience (e.g., Cox et al., 2008).

A number of studies have also specifically examined international media coverage of suffering, including within the Western media (see below). Taken together, the findings of these studies have typically indicated that the particular ways in which the media covered distant suffering was a major contributor to processes of othering – ‘an attempt to exclude individuals or all members of a group, by focusing on their ascribed or enacted identities’ (Hadzantonis, 2012: 75). For instance, Ong and McKenzie (2019) investigated the specific ways in which news was framed – within both UK and Malaysian newspapers – regarding the shooting down of flight MH17. Fine-grained analysis of the data obtained demonstrated that specific Western elite figures (i.e., *David Cameron* and *Barrack Obama*) were frequently portrayed as more important in the management of the air tragedy when compared to the leadership undertaken by Malaysian elite figures (e.g., *Najib* – Malaysia’s former prime minister), who, instead, were often presented as the unknown or unfamiliar ‘other’ within UK news reports. A similar study was conducted by Washer (2004) who

investigated the ways in which the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) pandemic was depicted within UK newspapers (i.e., within *The Observer*, *The People*, and *The Sunday Telegraph*). The analysis revealed that the Chinese population was frequently portrayed as an inevitable breeding ground for SARS. Additionally, SARS was presented to be unlikely to affect UK citizens, referred to as *us*, specifically because the Chinese, as *other*, were generally depicted as distinct from the UK population.

Evidence of ‘othering’ through news depictions of distant suffering was also revealed in Joye’s (2009) study of the representation of foreign natural disasters in Belgian news reports. Joye discovered that victims of both an Indonesian flood and an earthquake in Pakistan were frequently presented as ‘other’, i.e., passive victims of the forces of nature. By contrast, forest fires in more developed countries (i.e., the USA and Australia) were often portrayed as close to the spectator, sharing similar experience and in turn, categorised as ‘us’. From the study findings, Joye argued that distant sufferings within the media are likely to be conducted with classifications between ‘us’ and ‘others’. These classifications were found to be based upon perceived differences in levels of poverty, prosperity and danger as well as perceived sociocultural differences between countries.

Evidence from the above studies indicates that perceptions of ‘distance’ within the media are not always physical or geographical. Such perceptions can also be related to wider global structures of inequality, which are often maintained by differences in power, culture, wealth and race. This view is broadly compatible to Cottle (2000: 2), who maintains that the news media often perform an important role in the interplay between cultural power and the representation of unequal social relations more broadly. Cottle believes that, generally, it is through media representations, audiences are encouraged to construct a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, ‘foreigners’ and citizens’, ‘normal’ and deviant’, and ‘coloniser’ and ‘colonised’. In this

respect, the media thus potentially create spaces for the identities or the interests of others to be resisted, changed or challenged.

Nevertheless, whilst these previous studies provide important insights into the news reporting of a range of specific disasters, the investigation of narratives of human suffering in the public domain has received only negligible attention. For example, little is known about potential differences between the ways in which the same tragedy is discursively narrated within both media and public domains (Ong and McKenzie, 2019). The present investigation thus attempts to extend our understanding of human suffering through the investigation of the ways in which the Malaysian Airlines MH370 air tragedy is defined and constructed between the two language user groups (Malaysia vs. UK; outer vs. inner) in two different settings: (study 1) within the news media; and (study 2) amongst the general public.

### **Using Automated Semantic Tagging in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

In recent years, *semantic preference* has become an increasingly important topic of investigation for critical discourse analysis (CDA) researchers. Stubbs (2001) defines semantic preference as the relation between a lemma, or word-form, and a set of semantically related words. A number of prior studies have employed categorisation methods to investigate *semantic preference* within a particular news topic. Examples include Ong and McKenzie (2019) in Malaysia and the UK, Jaworska & Themistocleous (2018) in the UK and Gabrielatos & Baker (2008) in the UK. However, whilst semantic categorisation has proved useful as a method of identifying salient discourse topics within a larger corpus, analysis is usually undertaken manually. This manual approach has given rise to a number of criticisms, most especially since it is the researcher who decides the ways in which the data is interpreted, categorised, classified, and subsequently collocated semantically (Bednarek,

2008).

By contrast, in the present study, the calculation of semantic preference was undertaken by means of the automated semantics tagging system - UCREL Semantic Annotation System (USAS). This automated semantic tagging involves the application of a computerised semantic coding system, hence enabling more straightforward replication (see also Prentice, 2010). The USAS system groups items according to a semantic field taxonomy and assigns semantic categories to all words. Generally, the computerised semantic coding system consists of a semantic tag set of 21 major discourse fields and 232 fine-grained semantic field tags<sup>2</sup> (see Rayson et al., 2004). Figure 1 below shows the 21 major discourse fields.

A general and abstract terms	B the body and the individual	C arts and crafts	E emotion
F food and farming	G government and public	H architecture, housing and the home	I money and commerce in industry
K entertainment, sports and games	L life and living things	M movement, location, travel and transport	N numbers and measurement
O substances, materials, objects and equipment	P education	Q language and communication	S social actions, states and process
T Time	W world and environment	X psychological actions, states and processes	Y science and technology
Z names and grammar			

**Figure 1.** The USAS 21 major categories (adapted from Rayson et al., 2004).

There are two major benefits of using the USAS system in CDA studies: (1) as indicated above, the USAS system can help reduce potential researcher subjectivity since categories are identified mechanistically and systematically; (2) the USAS system generally offers more reliable results, by providing the same list of concepts within the same data even when analysed over different time periods.

In this study, we focus on *semantic preference* in relation to the keywords obtained within two complementary studies: from selected news corpus (study 1) and from the responses obtained from a keywords attitudinal study conducted amongst university students (study 2). It is worth noting that both sets of data can be classified into more specific semantic subsets that go beyond the basic categories of negative or positive semantic prosodies.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study 1 News Corpus Analysis***

The news corpus analysis aims to determine the ways in which the Malaysian Airlines tragedy MH370 is linguistically defined and constructed in relation to the keywords in the selected newspapers. In this study, we adopted Bondi & Scott's (2010) and Baker's (2010) definition of a keyword as a statistically significant word frequency (highest or lowest) in a text or corpus when compared to the standards set by a reference corpus (see also below).

#### *The Corpora*

The sampling frame consists of two Malaysian newspapers: *The New Straits Times* and *The Malaysian General News* as well as two UK newspapers: *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. The publication dates for all four newspapers ranged from 8 March 2014 to 31 July 2015. These dates cover the period when the tragedy was most reported<sup>3</sup>. All articles were downloaded from the online database - *NexisUK* - using the search term 'MH370'. Table 1 below shows specific details regarding the corpora: comprising 413 articles from the four chosen newspapers and encompassing a total of 278,123 tokens.

**Table 1.** News coverage of the Malaysian and UK corpora based on number of words (tokens) and number of articles.

Newspapers	Tokens	Articles
UK		
1. The Daily Telegraph	46,856	63
2. The Guardian	121,098	135
Total UK	167,954	198
Malaysia		
1. New Straits Time	36,580	60
2. Malaysian General News	73,589	155
Total Malaysia	110,169	215
<b>Total Malaysia and UK</b>	<b>278,123</b>	<b>413</b>

### *Instrument*

In order to analyse the newspaper data, we used the computer software *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) in order to generate the top 50 keywords as well as to view and sort concordance lines. By means of the generating of keyword searches, each of the Malaysian and UK corpora was subsequently compared to a general corpus – the British National Corpus (BNC). The word frequency of the BNC served as a baseline to establish whether, and to what extent, the keywords uncovered within our study were ‘corpus characteristic’ and not a ‘newspaper trend’ (Baker et al. 2013). Subsequently, using the USAS system of analysis, the top 50 keywords were grouped into different semantic categories. Since a number of the keywords could belong to more than one semantic category, further fine-grained analysis was undertaken upon the concordance lines.

### *Study 2 Attitudinal Study*

This study aimed to determine Malaysian and UK students’ attitudes towards the MH370 tragedy. For the purposes of the study, following (McGuire, 1985: 239), *attitude* is defined as a response which locates objects of thought on dimensions of judgment

### *Respondents*

Data were gathered from convenience samples of student volunteers attending public universities in Malaysia and the UK. The Malaysian cohort ( $n=50$ ) were undergraduate and postgraduate students. The sample included 28 females and 22 males, the age range was between from 20 to 59 years old (mean age=27, SD=10.1). The UK cohort ( $n=50$ ) were also undergraduate and postgraduate students: 31 were female and 19 were male, whose age ranged between 20 and 69 years old (mean age=27, SD=9.6). University students were deemed to be ideal candidates to serve as participants within the study since - given their student status - they would be less likely than other groups of individuals to not be involved with the tragedy in a professional capacity. It is worth mentioning that, at the time of the data collection, all the Malaysian students had studied and passed English language as a compulsory subject – indicating they have achieved at least an intermediate level of English proficiency. As a result, we considered that the Malaysian respondents relatively level of English proficiency would allow them to participate fully in the experiment.

### *Attitude Instrument*

Study 1 elicited respondents' spontaneous associations with the term 'MH370'. Specifically, both the Malaysian and UK respondents were requested to write three keywords as quickly as possible, individually, on presentation of the word 'MH370'. It was felt that this time constraint helped minimise opportunities for respondents could spend 'working-on' answers (see Garrett et al., 2006). This resulted in a total of 300 responses (3 keywords  $\times$  50 students  $\times$  2 groups). We then clustered these keywords into different semantic categories using the USAS system and subsequently calculated percentages as the basis for comparison.

## **Results and Preliminary Discussion**

### *Study 1*

Overall, 9 different semantic categories were identified (see Table 2). The analysis shows that there exist both a number of similarities as well as differences between the keywords employed within the Malaysian and the UK news corpora. For considerations of space, it was only possible to discuss those most salient categories in detail. It should also be noted that words presented in *‘italic’* represent the top keywords obtained from the news corpora.

**Table 2.** Identified semantic categories and percentages of total keywords within Malaysian and UK newspapers by category.

Semantic Categories	Malaysia		UK	
	Samples of Keywords (subcategories) <sup>4</sup>	Percentage of keywords	Samples of Keywords (subcategories) <sup>4</sup>	Percentage of keywords
A – General and abstract terms	-	0%	crashed (A1.1.2), crash (A1.1.2), vanished (A10)	6%
M – movement, location, travel & transport	aircraft (M5), southern (M6), disappearance (M1)	26%	plane (M5), disappearance (M1), cockpit (M5)	28%
O – Substances, materials, objections & equipment	radar (O3)	2%	radar(O3), debris (O1), wreckage(O1)	6%
S – social actions, states & process	MAS (S4), families (S4), crew (S5), passengers (S2)	8%	minister (S2), crew (S5), relatives (S4), investigators (S2), families (S4), officials (S7), authorities (S7)	18%
Q – language & communication	satellite (Q1.3)	2%	passport (Q1.2), data (Q1.1), satellite (Q1.3)	6%
T - Time	ended (T2)	4%	-	0%
W – World & environment	Sea (W3)	2%	Ocean (Z2)	4%
X – psychological actions, states & processes	search (X2.4), missing (X3.4), investigation (X2.4)	10%	search (X2.4), missing (X3.4)	6%
Z - names & grammar	Malaysia (Z2 Z3c), Datuk (Z3), Hishammuddin (Z99), Seri (Z1), Najib (z99)	46%	Australia (Z2), Malaysia’s (Z2 Z3), China (Z2), Inmarsat (Z99)	26%
Total		100%		100%

Table 2 above indicates the ‘Z’ (names & grammar) category constituted the largest category (Malaysia 46%, UK 26%) of use, accounting for nearly half of the total keywords in the Malaysian news corpus. In both corpora, keywords such as *‘Malaysian’*, *‘China’* and *‘Australian’* were employed to depict the nationality of the passengers and the parties involved. Given that MH370 carried 227 passengers from 15 nations, the employment of nationality-related keywords in news reporting was perhaps predictable. However, the use of several keywords within the ‘Z’ category point to major differences in focus between the

Malaysian and the UK corpora.

For instance, the Malaysian news media utilised a comparatively higher percentage of keywords to represent local authority figures (e.g. '*Datuk*', '*Seri*', '*Tun*' '*Najib*') when compared to the UK news media who, instead, tended to concentrate more frequently about the organisation and countries involved (e.g. '*China*', '*Australian*', '*Inmarsat*'). It is worth noting that '*Datuk*', '*Seri*' and '*Tun*' represent widely employed Malay honorific titles which are frequently used throughout Malaysia to address local governmental ministers. In Malaysia, it is a social norm to address important individuals – especially royalty or members of the Government - with their appropriate honorary titles to show respect for protocol (Prescott, 2009).

In the case of the present study, the relatively frequent appearance of honorific titles as keywords in the news corpus also seems to indicate the domination of local officials in the news coverage of the MH370 tragedy within the selected Malaysian newspapers. Indeed, '*Hishammuddin*' (Frequency: 238), the Acting Transport Minister of Malaysia during the period, and '*Najib Razak*' (Frequency: 190), the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, were regularly cited within the news corpora. They were cited most especially in relation to particular speeches and/or announcements they delivered and which pertain to the air accident. Additionally, the political implications of the individuals deemed to be accountable for the disaster were often amplified within Malaysian news articles (see Concordance 1). Due to word limits, only a small set of concordance lines are presented. Relevant words associated with '*Hishammuddin*' and '*Najib Razak*' as authority figures are highlighted in bold.

### Concordance 1 (Malaysian news corpus)

ceremony as acting transport minister,	<i>Hishammuddin</i>	said he was <b>prepared to shoulder the responsibility</b>
SEARCH Defence Minister Datuk Seri	<i>Hishammuddin</i>	Tun Hussein is <b>committed</b> to continue cooperating
concentrates on both sides of Malaysia,	<i>Hishammuddin</i>	<b>promised</b> that the authorities will do whatever

  

March 10 - Prime Minister Datuk Seri	<i>Najib</i>	Tun Razak <b>pledged</b> that the government will
acknowledging his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri	<i>Najib</i>	Tun Razak's <b>wisdom, strength and leadership</b>
released based on Prime Minister Datuk Seri	<i>Najib</i>	Tun Razak's <b>guiding principle</b> - that as

As shown in Concordance 1 above, ‘*Najib*’ and ‘*Hishammuddin*’ were surrounded by a range of broadly positive comments, for instance, ‘prepared to shoulder’, ‘committed’, ‘wisdom’, ‘strength’, ‘leadership’ and ‘guiding principle’. Indeed, both ‘*Najib*’ and ‘*Hishammuddin*’ were frequently afforded expert status within the Malaysian newspapers. More specifically, the voices of *Najib* and *Hishammuddin* were often afforded more credence and prominence than the investigators themselves, i.e., Inmarsat (a British satellite telecommunications company). Examples within the corpus include ‘*Hishammuddin* says SAR (search and recues) operation involving...’; and ‘*Najib* says data released by Inmarsat satellite concludes that...’ Moreover, issues related to the victims’ wellbeing were also generally reported through the voices of local ministers, for example, ‘... *Najib Tun Razak* expressing sympathy for the families...’. By contrast, the voices of the victims tended to be largely absent from the Malaysian corpus.

By contrast, a tendency to make greater use of common or collective nouns to address the Malaysian ministers was found within the selected UK newspapers, most especially ‘*minister*’, ‘*officials*’ and ‘*authorities*’ -. This tendency to employ more generic terminology to refer to Malaysian officials was particularly evident in the percentages uncovered within category ‘S’ (social actions, states & process). For example, the analysis undertaken within this category indicated that social actors were presented in 18% of occurrences within the UK corpus and in only 8% of occurrences within the Malaysian corpus. Interestingly, in the UK news media, analysis indicated that Malaysian officials were frequently associated with

negative and overtly critical terms, including the terms ‘criticised’, ‘anger’, ‘refused’, ‘accused’, ‘baffled’, ‘denied’, ‘ambiguous’, ‘inaccurate’, and ‘contradictory’ (see Concordance 2 below).

### Concordance 2 (UK news corpus)

Hussein, Malaysia's defence and transport	<i>minister</i>	, was <b>criticised</b> yesterday for claiming
Indian Ocean, Najib Razak, Malaysia's prime	<i>minister</i>	, may have directed part of that <b>anger</b> towards
Hussein, the Malaysian transport and defence	<i>minister</i>	, <b>refused</b> to comment on the military radar
the sea north of Brazil in 2009. Malaysian	<i>officials</i>	have also been <b>accused</b> of failing to share
communication said on its website. One Malaysian	<i>official</i>	, <b>baffled</b> by the lack of clarity 48 hours
climbing towards Beijing. However, Malaysian	<i>officials</i>	<b>denied</b> that the engines transmitted any
was not made public until now. Malaysian	<i>officials</i>	have given <b>ambiguous, inaccurate</b> and at
<b>cover-up</b> , and argues that the Malaysian	<i>authorities</i>	should <b>surrender</b> control of the investigate
recovered." <b>Anger</b> in Beijing at the Malaysian	<i>authorities</i>	<b>boiled</b> over yesterday morning, 12 hours
or <b>contradictory statements</b> by Malaysian	<i>authorities</i>	. Najib Razak, the Malaysian prime minister

Moreover, it was considered that the deliberate employment of more anonymous collective nouns within the UK newspapers to refer to high-ranking officials in the Malaysian Government potentially served to obscure those individuals who may indeed have purposely hidden or provided contradictory information (as indicated in concordance 2). However, since the terms ‘*authorities*’, ‘*officials*’ and ‘*minister*’ imply a de-personalising and more abstract perspective, one can more easily attribute blame to these anonymous individuals. It is also worth mentioning comments made within a specific article, attributed to former pilot Chris Goodfellow, published in one of the selected UK newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph* (June 16, 2014)). Goodfellow stated that the Malaysian *authorities* should surrender control of the investigation to the British Air Accidents Investigation Branch since he felt that Malaysia was withholding the truth – as a result of concerns about criminal and civil liabilities – in relation to the MH370 tragedy. The publication of this newspaper article in the UK-based Daily Telegraph perhaps highlights the division between ‘Britain’ as the in-group, with a

greater sense of responsibility and expertise, and ‘Malaysia’ as the out-group, identified as less competent and less reliable within UK newspapers more widely.

A similar dichotomy was also found in Pope’s (2017) study examining UK news discourse on drones in Pakistan. Analysis of the data obtained also suggested that the UK news media frequently presented the victims of drone strikes as an anonymous ‘Other’. In relation to counterterrorism, Pope (ibid) also found evidence of a general failure to provide the names of Pakistani individuals, often referring to them as ‘tribesmen’ or ‘local people’ within media reporting. Pope interpreted this finding as symptomatic of an overall tendency within UK newspapers to dehumanise the individuals most impacted by the drone strikes. In turn, it was felt that such anonymisation discouraged the promotion of sympathy for the sufferers, as well as the minimisation of ethical debate, amongst UK nationals reading those news reports.

Given that the disappearance of flight MH370 constituted a major airline disaster, we expected to find a range of aircraft-related terms in both corpora to depict movement, location, travel and transportation matters. Indeed, analysis of the semantic preference confirmed that key aircraft-related categories, such as ‘*aircraft*’, ‘*flight*’, ‘*Airlines*’ and ‘*disappearance*’, occurred frequently within both corpora (see Table 2: Category M). In terms of the latter category, it is important to note the divergent use of ‘*disappearance*’ within the two news corpora. Within the Malaysian newspapers, the term ‘*disappearance*’ was often framed by a comparatively neutral official discourse, whereby authority figures frequently used performative verbs - such as ‘declare’ or ‘announce’ (see also the left column of concordance 3) - to categorise the tragedy as an ‘accident’ or ‘unprecedented’ event (right side). This allows a rhetorical shift from blame attribution to the incident as mere tragedy. Indeed, within each of the Malaysian news articles no overt attribution of blame – and none directed to any parties – was uncovered. This finding echoes the view of van Dijk (1991: 40),

who claimed that powerful elite groups (in general), and especially within political domains, are able, at least in part, to control access to the media and can thus control the ways in which these elite groups are portrayed within the news. In addition, the voices and opinions of elite groups can subsequently be presented as more credible and legitimate.

### Concordance 3 (Malaysian News Corpus)

Department of Civil Aviation <b>announced</b> that the	<i>disappearance</i>	of the aircraft was an <b>accident</b>
Yesterday, the government <b>declared</b> the	<i>disappearance</i>	of MH370 as an <b>accident</b>
that MH370 will be found. <b>Admitting</b> that the	<i>disappearance</i>	was <b>unprecedented</b> . <b>Najib</b> also noted
Ahmad Jauhari <b>said</b> that since the	<i>disappearance</i>	of Flight MH370 on March 8, MAS

However, within the UK news corpus (see concordance 4), there appears to exist a greater tendency to account for the disappearance of flight MH370 in terms of conspiracy (e.g., ‘unexplained’), sorrow (e.g., ‘tragic’) or gross mismanagement (e.g., ‘xenophobic response’).

### Concordance 4 (UK News Corpus)

months after the aircraft's <b>unexplained</b>	<i>disappearance</i>	, suspicion over Capt Zaharie's involvement
sound unlikely - but so is the <b>incontestable</b>	<i>disappearance</i>	of a passenger plane with 239 people aboard
Airlines - that the possibility of a <b>deliberate</b>	<i>disappearance</i>	surfaced quickly. Some cited the possibility
fuelling concerns about the Boeing-777's <b>abrupt</b>	<i>disappearance</i>	in the early hours of Saturday - although
irregularly. A <b>xenophobic response</b> to the <b>tragic</b>	<i>disappearance</i>	of flight MH370 even before the facts are

Overall, the UK broadsheets tended to take a more critical stance in the reporting of the tragedy. Greater attention was generally paid to factual accounts, historical factors, attribution of blame as well as theories which may help account for the disappearance of the airplane. When compared to the Malaysian newspapers, our analysis of the UK newspapers suggests a more fine-grained and comprehensive news coverage of the management of the disaster. This coverage, in turn, placed greater emphasis upon aspects of risk reduction as opposed to

merely reacting to the potential impact of the disaster.

## Study 2

This section details the results of the MH370 tragedy, based on the keyword responses provided by the Malaysian and UK respondents. Table 3 details descriptive statistics, in the form of percentages of keyword responses, across each of the semantic categories.

**Table 3.** Identified semantic categories and percentages of total keywords by Malaysian university students ( $n=50$ ) and UK university students ( $n=50$ ) across each semantic category.

Semantic Categories	Malaysia		UK	
	Sample of keywords (subcategories) <sup>4</sup>	Percentage of Keywords	Sample of keywords (subcategories) <sup>4</sup>	Percentage of Keywords
A – General & abstract terms	mysterious (A6.2-), impossible (A7-), weird (A6.2-), cover up (A10-), useless (A1.5.2-), chaotic (A1.7-), danger (A15-),	19%	odd (A6.2-), weird (A6.2-), bizarre (A6.2-), mysterious (A6.2-), strange (A6.2-), disaster (A5.1-), awful (A5.1-), shocking (A5.1-)	38%
E – Emotion	sad (E4.1-), upset (E4.1-), shocked (E5-), sorrowful (E4.1-), anger (E3-), disappointed (E4.2-), fear (E5-), misery (E4.1-), pain (E4.1-), embarrassing (E5-), pity (E4.1-)	19%	hopeless (E4.1-), sad (E4.1-), anxiety (E6-), worrying (E6-), chilling (E5-), upsetting (E4.1-), upset (E4.1-), anger (E3-), tragedy (E4.1-), trauma (E4.1-), devastating (E4.1-), frightening (E5-)	24%
G – Government & public	conspiracy (G2.1- G2.2), Terrorist (G2.1-), hijacked (G2.1-), fishy (G2.2-), politics (G1.2)	9%	conspiracy (G2.1- G2.2-), suspicious (G2.1-), innocent (G2.1+)	10%
L – Life & living things	loss (L1-), death (L1-), life (L1)	4%	loss (L1), alive (L1+)	5%
M – Movement, location, travel & transport	Airline (M5), Air force (M5), flying (M1)	2%	somewhere still (M6),	1%
N – Numbers & measurement	sudden (N3.8+)	1%	-	0
O – Substances, materials, objects & equipment	control system (O3), black box (O3)	2%	-	0
Q – Language & communication	-	0%	Communication (Q2.1), satellite (Q1.3)	1%
S – Social actions, states & process	magic (S9), irresponsible (S1.2.6-), ridiculous (S1.2.6-), fate (S9), humanity (S1.2.1+)	7%	Irresponsible (S1.2.6-), ominous (S9)	2%
T – Time	3th March (T1.3), first time (T1)	2%		0%

X – Psychological actions, states & processes	unknown (X2.2-), mismanagement (X9.2-), inefficient (X9.1-), stupid bomod (shaman) (X9.1-), confusion (X2.5-), helpless (X9.1-)	17%	unknown (X2.2-), inexplicable (X2.5-), confusion (X2.5-), perplexing (X2.5-), failure (X9.2-), intriguing (X5.2+), interesting (X5.2+)	13%
Z – Names & grammar	Mangosteen (Z99), Raja bomoh (Shaman) (Z99), Najib (Z99), United State (Z2), China (Z2), Australia (Z2)	18%	Malaysia (Z2), Australia (Z2), International (Z2), Ocean (Z2)	6%
Total		100%	100%	

As indicated in Table 3 above, based on analysis of the keyword responses provided by the Malaysian and UK students about the MH370 tragedy, a total of 12 different semantic categories were identified. More specifically, the Malaysian student responses comprised a total of 11 semantic categories whereas, by contrast, there were only 9 semantic categories identified from the UK student responses. This difference in the number of semantic categories identified between the 2 cohort responses implies a greater diversity of perceptions among the Malaysian students regarding the air tragedy. For reasons of space, it is only possible to discuss the most salient categories in detail. In this study, we employ Kerswill, & Williams’s (2002: 86) definition of ‘salience’ as high-frequency items.

Across both the Malaysian and the UK respondents, the most salient associations with MH370 related to Category A – general & abstract terms (Malaysia 19% and UK 38%). Further fine-grained analysis of the subcategories indicated that both the Malaysian and the UK students often referred to the tragedy as an unusual event, evidenced by the frequent employment of the keywords: ‘*mysterious*’, ‘*odd*’, ‘*weird*’, ‘*bizarre*’. A number of UK students also commented upon the horrific nature of the tragedy, evidenced through the employment of keywords such as ‘*awful*’, ‘*shocking*’ and ‘*disaster*’. Despite the smaller word count (19%), the Malaysian students provided a wider range of lexical items, and also tended to focus upon different aspects of the tragedy. Examples include the deliberate concealment of the truth (e.g., ‘*cover up*’), the harmful nature of the situation (e.g., ‘*danger*’) and the ill-

fated nature of the plane's disappearance (e.g., '*unfortunate*').

In the case of Category E - emotion - both groups of students frequently reported feelings of sadness (e.g. '*sorrowful*', '*hopeless*'), violence/anger (e.g. '*anger*'), fear/shock (e.g., '*fear*', '*chilling*') and worry (e.g., '*worrying*'). Within other semantic categories, the percentage of keyword responses relating to emotional states was found to be greater amongst the UK students (24%) than amongst the Malaysian students (19%). This finding was interpreted as UK students' expressing greater levels of sympathy towards *distant suffering* when compared to the responses provided by the Malaysian students towards what constituted a more *local suffering*.

Both the Malaysian and the UK students also provided a number of keyword responses which were classified under the category of Government & public (Category G) (Malaysia 9%, UK 10%). More specifically, both student cohorts frequently referred to the disappearance of flight MH370 as a crime. The analysis indicated that the Malaysian students' frequent employment of keywords, such as '*terrorist*' and '*hijacked*', pointed to a general tendency for the disappearance of MH370 to be perceived as a terrorist attack. By contrast, the analysis of the UK students' comments revealed that the incident was often described as a '*conspiracy*' and as a '*suspicious*' event, i.e., with fewer comments relating to the possibility of terrorist activity.

Within the Category of life & living things (Category L) and the Category of movement, location, travel & transport (Category M), several UK-based students provided the keyword responses '*alive*' and '*somewhere still*', perhaps pointing to expressions of hopefulness and/or the level of confidence to locate the missing aircraft and/or survivors. The use of these keywords suggests more positive perceptions amongst the UK students regarding the potential outcome of tragedy.

The attitudinal data also indicated that both the Malaysian and the UK students made

frequent references to Category X - psychological actions, states & processes (Malaysia 17%, UK 13%). Within this category, the Malaysian students were found to provide a number of comments referring to a lack of ability and/or intelligence (potentially amongst the local authorities), through the employment of keywords such as *'inefficient'*, *'helpless'* and *'stupid bomod'* (*'Bomoh'* is a Malay word referring to a shaman). The use of the latter term potentially relates to an incident where, shortly after the disappearance of MH370, a Malaysian shaman - wielding coconuts, a walking stick and a carpet - attempted to locate the missing flight. This action, perhaps understandably, triggered a high number of comments, expressing both outrage and embarrassment amongst many social media users in Malaysia<sup>4</sup>. Thus, it may be the case that many of the Malaysian students' responses included in this Category X also reflected their negative perceptions of the actions taken by the shaman.

The UK student keyword responses within this category tended to indicate a greater focus upon matters related to failure (e.g. *'unresolved'*, *'failure'*) and confusion (e.g., *'perplexing'*, *'inexplicable'*). Interestingly, several UK students described the air accident as an interesting or exciting event, evidenced through the use of the keywords *'intriguing'* and *'interesting'*. Potentially, the disappearance of flight MH370 stimulated the students' interest in the incident, thus shifting their attention from human suffering to an unsolved mystery.

## **General Discussion and Conclusions**

The present research consisted of the undertaking of two related studies. Study 1 investigated the narratives of MH370 in four selected Malaysian and UK newspapers (based on the top 50 keywords). Study 2 comprised of an examination of Malaysian and UK University students' attitudes toward the MH370 tragedy. The analysis of the MH370 tragedy in both the Malaysian and UK news corpora (Study 1) revealed a consistent portrayal of the incident within classifications between 'us' and 'other'. By contrast, the attitudinal data collected in

Study 2 indicated a greater emotional engagement, amongst both Malaysian and UK university students, with the MH370 tragedy.

In the Malaysian context, Study 1 revealed journalists often provided a more localised focus to the tragedy, especially through the framing of the disappearance of flight MH370 as a specifically Malaysia-oriented issue. For instance, Malaysian Government officials were largely portrayed as possessing the capacity to assist the victims and were afforded the main responsibility of locating the missing airplane. Such frequent mention within the selected Malaysian newspapers of the voices of the Malaysian elites as playing a key role in crisis, in turn, seemed to help construct representations of the Malaysian Government as both capable and accountable, whilst simultaneously portraying the unheard victims as the ‘other’, and as both passive and voiceless. Such government domination is perhaps unsurprising considering the overall tendency for the Malaysian Government to employ the media as a key instrument for national development (Bier et al., 2018).

Interestingly, analysis of the attitudinal data obtained in study 2 indicated that the Malaysian students tended to express stronger criticisms than the UK students, especially towards the ‘Raja bomod’ (shaman). Several Malaysian students’ emotional involvement with the suffering was expressed through indignation. They thus often provided keywords with reference to both the perceived causes of the suffering (e.g., ‘*hijacked*’) and the perceived perpetrators (e.g., ‘*terrorist*’). Indeed, despite the lower percentage of keywords categorised within the category of emotion – as opposed to the UK student responses to the MH370 tragedy – analysis of the Malaysian student comments were found to contain a higher percentage of evaluative responses (e.g., ‘*embarrassing*’). These results thus imply that the position of the Malaysian newspapers towards the MH370 tragedy is not necessarily shared by the general public in Malaysia. Indeed, the generally overt positive representation of the Malaysian Government found within the Malaysian newspapers was largely absent in the

students' comments. Perhaps ironically, the Malaysian students seemed to be more concerned about perceived political scandals which took place in the aftermath of the air tragedy (e.g. 'cover up', *inefficient*, 'mismanagement').

The analysis of the UK news corpus data (study 1) uncovered evidence of the construction of socio-cultural differences between 'capable us' (the UK) and the 'incapable other' (Malaysia). Several prior studies also found evidence that the Western media – including both within and outwith the UK media – frequently afforded lower levels, and lower levels of fine-grained analyses, of the coverage of distant suffering within non-Western countries (e.g., Ong and McKenzie, 2019; Pope, 2017; Joye, 2010; Chouliaraki, 2006). For this reason, there have been a number of criticisms of Western reporting of distant suffering within non-Western contexts (Joye, 2010), most especially in terms of portraying distant sufferers as helpless, and lacking both aspirations and competence (Ong and McKenzie, 2019). Such representations thus imply a discourse of Western superiority over non-Western nations deemed 'other'.

Since analysis of the UK attitudinal data also indicated that the MH370 tragedy is perceived to be a distant suffering for many of the UK students, it was somewhat surprising to find evidence that the UK student group were found to express a higher percentage of emotional response to the tragedy than the Malaysian cohort (Malaysia 19%, UK 24%). This relatively high degree of emotional response was interpreted as illustrative of a greater level of engagement amongst the UK students with regards to the distant suffering. However, the greater emotional engagement of the UK students with the tragedy often seems to involve 'pity' (see Chouliaraki, 2012: 113) rather than genuine sympathy. According to Chouliaraki (ibid), 'pity' refers to the moral obligation for the spectator to respond to a sufferer's misfortune. It is important to acknowledge that whilst it may be the case that pity is an overriding emotional response amongst many of the UK students, these individuals may be

emotionally engaged with the victims of the tragedy in other ways. Indeed, analysis of the UK students' keyword responses found lower levels of constructing a dichotomy between 'us' (the UK) and 'others' (Malaysia).

In conclusion, the newspapers analysis undertaken in study 1 suggested that the specific language employed in the news reporting of the MH370 tragedy is likely to create a social distance between 'us' and 'others' in both UK and Malaysian newspapers. By contrast, in the case of study 2, a fine-grained analysis of the keyword responses provided by the UK and Malaysian students towards the tragedy revealed minimal evidence of representations between 'us' and 'others'. In the case of the latter, the finding implies that the suffering of the MH370 passengers was perceived as something close for both the UK and the Malaysian student cohorts. For this reason, the present investigation is especially innovative in its uncovering of contradictory narratives of human suffering in two different contexts (i.e., within news media and amongst the general public). This finding is of wider social importance since, by studying the constructions of human suffering, we potentially become more sensitive to the language used which, in turn, may raise awareness of how (if) we and/or the news media collude in creating and maintaining the othering process.

However, the reader should bear in mind the possibility exists that some respondents in the attitude study might have reported more socially desirable responses as opposed to their 'true' evaluations (e.g., Garrett, 2010; McKenzie, 2010). Nevertheless, the use of semantic tagging to undertake critical discourse analysis has enabled a more robust comparison and contrast between the data obtained in Malaysia and the UK, and between the newspaper corpus data and attitudinal data obtained. In addition, the results gained from the present study specifically extend the work of our prior foundational study (Ong and McKenzie, 2019) – also investigating the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 – where only manual analyses were employed. Indeed, the results of the present investigation indicate

that the use of the semantic tagging system offers a more robust, fine-grained categorisation scheme, enabling researchers to uncover differences between the keywords in a more systematic way. In this way, the semantic tagging system has allowed us to largely disregard any subjective knowledge we had regarding the MH370 tragedy.

Our analysis of both media and public attitudes towards the air tragedy represents a useful starting point for further in-depth multidisciplinary analysis comparing and contrasting media portrayals and public perceptions of human suffering. Future research could, for instance, investigate the specific use of aviation English more fully in relation to the air disasters. Essentially, the investigation of the effects of such contradictory narratives surrounding human suffering amongst very different groups of (English) language users and within these very different two contexts (i.e., within the news media and amongst the general public) seem an important avenue for future research.

## Notes

1. The reference is taken from: <https://www.ibtimes.com/mh370-search-hits-record-price-tag-malaysia-government-spends-70m-aviation-2344123>
2. See UCREL's web pages - <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/usas/> on the USAS system for the full coding scheme, and for a visualization of this coding scheme.
3. The date restriction of the data collection was based on a timeline provided by Geoffrey Thomas. Available at <https://www.airlineratings.com/news/mh370-timeline/>
4. The reference is taken from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-26564562>

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