

# The Ideological Representation of Iraqi Human Rights Violations in American Online Newspaper Discourse

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## Abstract

*Language used in newspapers can influence the readers' view on the issues published in them. Language is no longer a mere means of communicating information; but it also generates and shapes the social interaction with such issues. This could be achieved through the effective representation of these issues using linguistic expressions. Therefore, this study investigates the ideological representation of human rights violations in newspaper discourse. The data of this study is collected from news articles published in American online newspapers, namely, the Washington Post and New York Times, on the issue of the human rights violations, particularly the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Iraq. Accordingly, Van Dijk's (1998) theory of ideology is also employed to examine group ideology and portrayal of "Self" and "Others" in these newspapers. It is found that in both newspapers, group ideology was manifested through presenting positive in-group actions, such as peaceful demonstrations, supporting protesters, resisting and warning against out-group violent procedures. Moreover, the newspapers focused on the victims of protesters (as in-group), while generalizing the negative reactions of government, political parties, and security forces (as out-group) toward protests and protesters.*

**Keywords:** *Effective Language, Human Rights Violation, Newspaper Discourse, Ideology, Protest.*

## INTRODUCTION

A newspaper, as a media type, is considered as a preferred readable source of information in the world, from which people receive adequate updates on current events and issues in the world (Lamichhane, 2017). It is regarded as a medium of “shaping public opinion and policy” (Haque & Sheikh, 1993, p. 1). This is achieved through the language used in the representation of different events and issues. Researchers are interested in analyzing the language used in newspapers to convey such events and issues, as newspapers represent acts in a way that influences the reader's view on them (Ahmadian & Farahani, 2014).

According to Jorgensen and Phillips (2002), language is more than merely a means of communicating information; it also generates and shapes the social world. Fairclough (1995) offers a different viewpoint, considering language as the primary means for persuading people to accept specific representations of news events. In this sense, the linguistic representation of issues (such as human rights violations (henceforth, HRVs), immigration, trafficking) or groups (such as Muslims, immigrants, Middle East people) in the newspapers is based on the news producers' ideology (Dodantenna, 2020; Hansen, 2020). Therefore, news articles can be analyzed to identify the ideology of representation, as well as the underlying intentions concealed behind their discursive construction.

Moreover, when media outlets and organizations employ language, it has the potential to be more effective (Hanan, 2017), as in the American newspapers. In this regard, "Washington Post and New York Times" are American online newspapers that the readers worldwide prefer and trust in while reading news. They are among the elite or high-quality news media sources in the United States and around the world, as evidenced by its renowned international publishing (Al-Gamde & Tenbrink, 2020). In sum, it is critical to understand how journalists use language to construct news discourse in order to convey particular ideologies, as well as how language may be used to manipulate and influence the audience's feelings, thoughts, and actions (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1988).

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In this regard, the effective use of language with employing discursive strategies such as description of actor, generalization, and victimization may imply socio-political notions (Van Dijk, 1980). Using these strategies, the subjects and core meanings of a specific text can be defined and recognized, as well as the polarization of positive Us and negative Them can be applied to newspaper discourse depending on the ideology of the discourse provider (Shaban, 2020). Hence, the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in such research is necessary (Van Dijk, 1998) to analyze the newspaper discourse ideologically. The reasons are to create and increase awareness, as well as to gain a thorough grasp of the linguistic choices and strategies that are mostly utilized to construct "Self-positive" and "Other-negative" ideological representations in different discourses.

In brief, the current study focuses on the language used in the ideological representation of HRVs in Iraq in terms of "Self-positive" and "Other-negative" polarities in American online newspapers of the Washington Post and New York Times. This study is concerned with news articles published on HRVs in the post-ISIS Iraq era in 2019 in order to investigate the underlying motives behind their statements.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section presents the theoretical basis of the present study. It highlights the language used in newspaper discourse, and its role in representing the events and issues through the reports of media institutions. In addition, it clarifies the concept of ideology and discursive strategies.

### **Language of Newspaper Discourse**

In newspaper discourse, language plays a crucial part in the news writing system, since it indicates the writer's or journalist's ability to represent events effectively. Many researchers have studied the language used in news media discourse, due to its significance to such discourse. They are interested in how language is employed in newspaper discourse (Al-Gamde & Tenbrink, 2020; Ali, 2017; Ali, 2018). They have studied the influence of word choices and grammatical structures on the audience opinion through the way in which a news event is presented.

Language is more than just a means of communication; it also reflects our social and human activities, since we use it to communicate what we think and do in spoken and written discourses (Ali, 2017). Fairclough (1989) asserts that language reveals our attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs.

Other academics have highlighted the newspaper language as a method of informing the public about various social interaction patterns. It represents a wide range of linguistic notions and perspectives on human activities. In this regard, Bell (1991) concurred on the concept that portrays newspapers as institutions for the production and realization of language. Because of this, the realization of cultural, political, social, ideological, and economic challenges requires more attention to be paid to the function that language plays in media discourse. In the newspaper discourse, the connection between the media (the press), on the one hand, and language usage, on the other, is an essential component of critical and analytical research (Ali, 2017). Moreover, language is regarded as a system that gives language users with choices. Every decision that is made within this framework has significance, in the sense that it creates a mode of representing the world, engaging with other people, and organizing information.

### **Media Reporting on the Socio-Political Issues**

The media has long been regarded as having a significant role and influence in different fields. The media is considered as an indirect means of monitoring abuses. According to Hafner-Burton and Ron (2013), media reporting additionally provides government accounts of socio-political issues, which influence aid, trade and diplomatic policies. Hence, when the global media provide reports on such issues, regional biases emerge, complicating their application in scholarship and policy-making. For instance, Hafner-Burton and Ron (2013) established that media coverage of terrorism and human rights in the Middle East is biased and may influence the discourse.

News reports on human rights concerns influence public opinion and the evolution of foreign policy. The human rights issue has been more prominent in recent years, with governments and political figures increasingly

referring to international human rights principles, both in formal policy proposals and in public speeches. Therefore, it is assumed that, as media coverage of human rights expands, it is increasingly appropriate to expect journalists and broadcasters to convey them honestly. This premise is founded on the notion that media coverage of human rights concerns influences policy and scholarly interest, providing information to both scholars and policymakers (Hafner-Burton & Ron, 2013).

The significance of major media platforms stems from their impact on a wide range of resources, particularly in the online domain, which is critical for information search and public engagement. The internet-based media is the best venue to explore newspaper discourses because they serve as a mirror that guides offline discourses and actions (Jam et al., 2013). Online media allows for unprecedented and unobtrusive evaluations, notably of how the public views, discusses, and supports specific issues. According to Salgado (2018), the new domain of media (online media) has become the most prominent media type that most politicians and governments have exploited ideologically, to mislead viewers towards local and global issues, such as human rights.

In summary, the impact of online media on public opinion has increased significantly, raising a plethora of unsolved policy and human rights issues (Tartory, 2020). The American online media (primarily the Washington Post and New York Times online newspapers) are regarded as the most suitable media source for reporting on human rights, because media coverage is always selective, and the characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of journalists influence what is reported on human rights. The online media outlets have a huge impact on human rights around the world, through the policies they implement on their viewers.

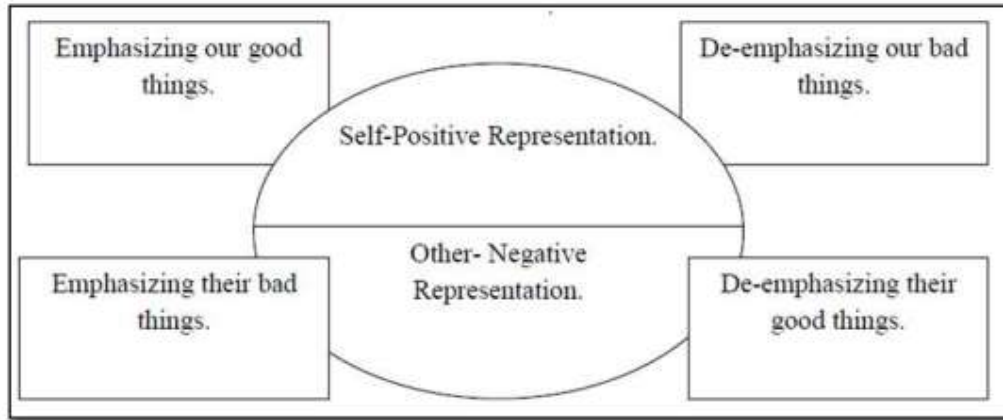
Brandle (2018) believed that most human rights reports followed the opinion of their governments with particular ideology and policy towards other governments and communities. Based on these arguments, the researcher intends to investigate the ideology of the Washington Post and New York Times online newspapers while covering HRVs in Iraq post-ISIS in its discourse.

### **The Concept of Ideology**

The word “ideology” was introduced firstly at the end of the 18th century; it was related to a set of ideas and beliefs (Van Dijk, 2005). The traditional Marxist conception of the term ideology has often been conceptualized as false-consciousness. Accordingly, ideology tends to be usually understood as bad belief. Undoubtedly, this very understanding has been the basis of the dichotomization of ideological orientations and presumed impartial scientific knowledge.

Another opinion was introduced by Taiwo (2007) referring to ideology as attitudes, opinions, values that can influence the views of individuals and groups perception. In the same vein, Johnstone (2017) defined ideology as a system of beliefs. According to Simpson (1993), ideology refers to “the values structures and collections of beliefs held by social classes, and it can be expressed in text by specific linguistic practices, as language represents ideology and creates it”. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) view ideology as “a special way of portraying and creating a society that reproduces unequal control, dominant and exploitative relationships”. While Van Dijk (1995) considered ideology as “socio-cultural values like equality, fairness, reality, or performance”.

This study adopts Van Dijk’s (1998) concept of ideology as presented in his approach of “Ideological Square” to examine news discourse thoroughly and critically, investigating how ideology is presented and encoded. Figure (1) illustrates the approach of Ideological Square more clearly.



**Figure 1. Van Dijk's Ideological Square (1998).**

Based on this figure, Van Dijk (2000) introduces four principles for the analysis of ideology in this approach. These principles include: 1) Emphasize positive things about Us; 2) De-emphasize negative things about Us. These two principles express emphasizing the positive actions of what the media institution considers the in-group, and deemphasizing its negative actions. While these two principles 3) Emphasize negative things about Them and 4) De-emphasize positive things about Them, deemphasize the positive actions of the out-group, and emphasize its negative actions.

Van Dijk (1998) believed that discourse is not constructed to inform the readers only, but rather it represents the ideological and editorial positions of the people or organizations that are involved in the construction and production process of this discourse. To Yin (2007), such discourse is appropriate (although it is an ideological discourse) to reinforce authoritarian control by the state. Finally, Le (2002) states that as social beings, we express ourselves by means of the sociocultural values of the society we belong to.

### **Discursive Strategies**

Recently, academics in different fields like media and politics, such as Algamde (2019); Ali (2018); Brandle (2018); Hopewell (2017) become more interested and focused on studying socio-political events, exploring the ways in which different issues are represented in newspaper discourse. These studies showed that the newspaper discourse has a significant role in the representation process and its ideological concepts concerning socio-political issues. This can be done through the effective use of language with employing discursive strategies such as description of actor, generalization, and victimization (Van Dijk, 1980). According to Van Dijk (2000), these strategies are used to simplify the meaning of the text. Using these strategies, the subjects and core meanings of a specific text can be defined and recognized, as well as the polarization of positive Us and negative Them can be applied to newspaper discourse depending on the ideology of the discourse provider (Shaban, 2020).

To clarify these strategies, actor description is used to determine whether an out-group and an in-group are shown as neutral, positive, repulsive, or negative. This technique is concerned with how people are described in the discourse, as well as the roles, identities, relationships, gender, age, ethnicity, class, affiliations, and organizations that are used to describe those people. This strategy represents the core of the ideological polarization of Positive Us and Negative Others in discriminatory and prejudiced discourses (Van Dijk, 1998). While generalization is the process through which the meaning of a term or phrase becomes more broad or comprehensive in relation to its original meaning; it is frequently employed in a racist discourse such that prejudices and negative characteristics are over-generalized. This strategy is one of the most effective strategies in social and political discourse. It means "generalizing from one person or a small group to a larger group or category" (VanDijk, 1995, p.155). As for victimization, it is the use of "binary us- them pair of in groups and out groups" (Van Dijk, 2005, p. 739) to show out-group members negatively, and portray in-group members as the victims of unfair treatment.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is qualitative in nature in order to provide an in-depth analysis for the issue under study. It is based on CDA to examine the ideological representation of HRVs of a different social group, in which the representation of Self and Other occurs particularly based on religion and nationality, race, etc., in the Washington Post and New York Times online newspapers. The ideological analysis is carried out in accordance with Van Dijk's (1998) "Ideological Square" for exposing the opposite groups' ideology hidden in the text of news articles. In addition, discursive strategies analysis is used to examine the in-depth ideological structures employed in the news articles. This analysis examines three discursive strategies of victimization, generalization, and description of actor as presented by Van Dijk (2000) to establish the actual characteristics and features of the analyzed discourse.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section is concerned with the analysis of the ideologies of the Washington Post and New York Times online newspapers that are reflected in the depiction of HRVs in post-ISIS Iraq. Thus, the analysis in the section is divided into two levels: using Van Dijk's (1998) notion of "Ideological Square" including US vs THEM or "Positive Us" and "Negative Others" at the first level; then, employing Van Dijk's (2000) discursive strategies including the description of actor, generalization, and victimization.

### **Ideological Square**

The Washington Post and New York Times construct their own ideological views reflecting the positive "Self" and negative "Other" identities from their own ideological perspective. Accordingly, the Washington Post and New York Times in their articles present two ideological groups expressed and conveyed to its readers, manifesting its ideology concerning the Iraqi event.

### **"Positive Self" Representation**

In these sentences:

1. 319 have been killed and 15,000 wounded through the anti-government demonstrations.
2. As crowds start to thin, hundreds of protesters have been arrested.
3. Volunteer medics have disappeared.
4. Protesters are scared, but they have to stay.
5. Iraqi people protesting call for their rights.
6. Tribal leaders joining.
7. Prominent Shiite cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr.
8. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani did not trust the political parties about enacting real reforms.
9. White House was 'seriously concerned' about the ongoing violence and attacks that target leading activists

Positive "Self" includes protesters who call for their rights, Volunteer medics, religious representatives, and the White House. Thus, the Washington Post's positive group represents the protesters and medics, who risked their lives for severe life circumstances. This is in addition to the country's leading Shiite Muslim cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani as a leading religious advisor, as well as the White House as the human rights watcher and Iraqi government policy advisor. The American newspapers view protesters as the victim of poverty, governmental corruption and stifled freedoms. Searching for a better life, they demonstrate against the government, as they have nothing to lose. Thus, in a fatal protest, protesters risk their lives when they face governmental violence for the ouster of the entire political system. They are the victims of poverty, destitution, and lack of decent life and living. The Washington Post and New York Times, in presenting different people types, such as religious leading persons, medics and activists, seeks to state that the Iraqi society rejects the current political system. By tackling this issue, the newspapers aim to make it a public opinion issue to find an effective remedy. By providing such information, the Washington Post and New York Times assert two facts about this group ('Self' group): a) The protesters group is oppressed socially and politically in Iraq as it faces real-life experiences and difficult issues in an oil-rich country and corrupted political system. b) The group of protesters, religious leaders, and international policy watchers is the strongest one through revolting, advising,

and warning against social and political oppression. Hence, the Washington Post and New York Times draw this group positively as a positive power, who are resisting against the Iraqi government oppressing people's rights. Thus, the American newspapers present this group as the positive "Self" that should be supported.

### **"Negative Other" Representation**

Negative "Other" includes the whole political class and their supporters as well as the intelligence officers. This group represents the ruling political regimes in the post-ISIS era, who profited from an electoral system. These regimes are famed by their political and financial corruption that led to the increased suffering of the Iraqi people, failure to address the youth population experiencing widespread unemployment, and provide the basic services in an oil-rich country. For this, huge protests spread in most Iraqi cities from Baghdad to the south cities forcing the government to resign, due to its failure to serve the Iraqi people with no solution for their difficulties. However, the previous governments also failed to deal with many files, including services, corruption and unemployment, in addition to foreign presence in the country. With this, all governments after 2003 failed to solve the suffering of the Iraqis, and provide basic services and needs. Accordingly, the Washington Post and New York Times try to show this group's negative side, concentrating on its failure to deal with these huge protests, and provide peoples' needs and rights, as clarified in these sentences:

1. Government violated the Iraqi protesters.
2. Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and his government for their fail in providing good lives for Iraqi people
3. Protesters called for ouster of all political system.
4. The security forces killing of protesters
5. Iraqi Parliament politicians' words have been met with disbelief.

By such indications, the Washington Post and New York Times assert two main facts about this group (Others group): a) This group is the oppressing one that has ruled Iraq in the post-ISIS era, who had made promises to the Iraqi people to improve their lives and provide basic services, but failed to help them achieve prosperity. b) This group is weak, as it failed to face the political upheaval and crisis, while keeping its promises to the Iraqi people, in dealing with protesters. In brief, the Washington Post and New York Times depict this group negatively, as a negative power that has failed to help its people to diminish their agony. Therefore, American newspapers present this group as the negative "Other" that should be antagonized. In sum, the ideological analysis shows that the Washington Post and New York Times ideologies are manifested through the notion of positive "Self" presentation and negative "Other" presentation. Their ideologies are embedded through the presentation of in-group members and out-group ones, respectively.

The ideological analysis shows that the in-group, represented by the Iraqi protesters, the influential Shiite clerics, the human rights commission, tribal leaders, Dijla, and some channels, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the top U.N. officials, and the United States, the United States Embassy, and the White House, is depicted positively. On the one hand, the in-group members are portrayed as protesters practicing their rights of freedom to peaceful assembly and free expression, or supporters for the demonstrators' demands. On the other hand, the out-group, represented by the Iraqi government, the political class, the president and prime minister, the government's forces and officers and the militias, is portrayed negatively, as killers, committing HRVs against peaceful protesters, and users of violent weapons and procedures.

### **Discursive Strategies**

In this section, the analysis focuses on the discursive strategies that are used by the Washington Post and New York Times newspapers in their articles. These strategies (Description of the Actor, Generalization, and Victimization) are used to support the ideological square analysis in showing the ideology of the American online newspapers in depicting the issue under investigation. In the majority of scenarios, the Washington Post and New York Times employ the discursive strategy of victimization in terms of chastising unarmed protesters in Iraq, generalization in terms of unacceptability, and unjustification of excessive use of power. Furthermore, the negative actor description is employed in terms of favoring the in-group, which are the protesters, and repressing the out-group, which is the Iraqi government machinery. Overall, the coverage was dominated by the positive representation of Iraqi protesters, and negative representation of Iraqi government policy.

The Washington Post and New York Times mention that the use of pellets, stun grenades, tear gas, and water cannons is extensively witnessed. The Washington Post refers to the types of weapons never used before in protests but in wars and battles, against ISIS for example. The newspaper describes the photos of protesters' victims as almost (unshareable), by using the sentence (These are truly gruesome deaths). Furthermore, the news gave a more detailed description of the weapons used to control the demonstration, and how these weapons were fired directly at the protesters' heads and chests, by describing the damage that resulted in (smashed skulls and the death of people on impact). All these statements and descriptions refer to the negative-other (out-group) presentation of the actors (Iraqi government, political parties, Iraqi forces), and how they dealt with protests, compared to the positive-self (in-group) presentation of protesters, as they are civilians (unarmed).

Also, there is a generalization towards the political class in Iraq, due to their reaction against the protesters. The newspapers refer to the fact that the political class (out-group) stand together to face protest in the country (negative representation). The following examples show the generalization of both in-group and out-group.

Generalization (for in-group):

1. Iraq's protesters have withstood bullets and stun grenades, tear gas and water cannons...
2. Everyone is scared now, but we have to stay.
3. In Tahrir Square on Monday night, the protesters' signs reflected his words.
4. Protesters can't go home until the government fulfills our demands.
5. No one feels safe to leave here, so we'll stay.

Generalization (for out-group):

1. The political class scrambled, then it closed ranks.
2. Groups from across Iraq's political spectrum have closed ranks with an agreement to protect the system.
3. Everyone is behind the prime minister.
4. No longer able to rely on empty promises, Baghdad's elite are returning to a familiar strategy to smother the existential threat that this popular mobilisation represents: violence.
5. Police tell the activists they manage to arrest that it is in their best interests to inform on friends.

The analysis of discursive strategies shows that the Washington Post used the discursive strategy of victimization, in terms of persecuting the unarmed protesters in Iraq. Through the use of the victimization strategy, the Washington Post pays attention and focuses on the protesters as victims (in-group), while ignoring the victims of security forces (out-group). On the other hand, generalization is used in terms of unacceptability and unjustification of excessive use of power in the majority of the scenarios. The actor description is used, as follows: negative actor description, in terms of favoring the in-group (protesters) and oppressing the out-group (Iraqi government and political system); providing more details about the bad actions of out-group (violations, weapons used, their react towards the protests); and generalizing the responsibilities of the whole political class, government, and security forces on the violations committed against protesters. Generally, the Washington Post journalists were shocked by the human rights violations in Iraq post-ISIS, and they tried to stir a debate in their readers' minds, locally and globally, in order to put an end to that violence as the government promised its people to be a democratic country. The Washington Post journalists have written mostly for the international society to inform about what is happening in Iraq, and to the Iraqi society to inform about who supports Iraqi protests. However, the Washington Post works within the Western liberalism framework by reporting sensitive issues in the Middle East (human rights violations) based on the liberalist ideology to reflect the west's hegemonic power to control the affairs of Middle Eastern countries.

It is found that the Washington Post used statements and descriptions, referring to the negative "Other" (out-group) presentation of the actors (Iraqi government, political parties, Iraqi forces), on how they dealt with protesters by violating their rights, in comparison to the positive "Self" (in-group) presentation of protesters, as they are peaceful and unarmed civilians. In terms of victimization, the newspapers focus mostly on the victims of protesters (in-group), while the generalization strategy was used in terms of unacceptability and justification of excessive use of power in the majority of the scenarios.

## CONCLUSION

As stated earlier, the newspaper discourse is not constructed to inform the readers only, but rather it represents the ideological and editorial positions of the people or organizations that are involved in the construction and production process of this discourse. In this regard, the Washington Post online newspaper presented the Iraqi protesters, the influential Shiite clerics, the human rights commission, tribal leaders, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the top U.N. official, as well as the United States, the United States Embassy, and the White House, as the in-group, and depicted them positively. The in-group members are portrayed as protesters practicing their rights of freedom to peaceful assembly and free expression, or as supporters of the demonstrators' demands. The Washington Post represents this group as a powerful force that fights for their basic rights in the face of government violence, emphasizing their actions and rights to protest, and alter the government. In other words, they are shown as the positive "Self" (in-group) who should be recognized, encouraged, and supported. This validates the online newspapers' support for the protests that have erupted across Iraq, in response to the government's transgressions.

In contrast, the Iraqi government, the political elite, the president and Prime Minister, government soldiers and officers, militias and security forces represent the out-group, and are described as murderers, who perpetrate HRVs against peaceful protesters, and employ lethal weapons and procedures. Furthermore, the Washington Post represents this group as a negative authority that fails to enhance public services or provide jobs. Because of the influence of fraudulent political parties and their militias, the post-ISIS political system and administration are labeled as corrupted. The out-group, according to the online newspapers, is an oppressive group that has governed the Iraqi people for years, without accountability of their actions, or improvement of living needs for the people. At the same time, the Washington Post referred to this group as the weak group for launching the violent crackdown against civilian protesters, focusing on the infraction of dealing with protesters and employing force against them. As a result, the online newspapers present this group as the negative "Other" that should be opposed.

Furthermore, the discursive strategies also showed the biasness of Washington Post, as they concentrated on the victims of protesters to show the government's violations, generalizing the government and its forces negative actions in dealing with protests. The discursive strategies, including description of actors, generalization, and victimization, were used in the newspapers to criminalize the Iraqi government and its forces regarding the violations committed against the Iraqi protesters, and to assign responsibility for these violations. Additionally, the discursive strategies were used to give support to phatic arguments regarding the violations faced by protesters, and their need for help and support through emotional appeals. This is in line with Benson's (2014) view that victimization is always framed in a sympathetic manner.

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