

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW,
GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNICATION
(IJLGC)
www.ijlgc.com



**HEDGES AND BOOSTERS IN SPORTS COLUMNS OF
THE STAR AND *NEW STRAITS TIMES***

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 27.07.2025

Revised date: 20.08.2025

Accepted date: 22.09.2025

Published date: 30.09.2025

To cite this document:

Abdul Rahim, N. E., & Ahmad, M. Z. H. (2025). Hedges And Boosters in Sports Columns of *The Star* and *New Straits Times*. *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, 10 (41), 851-863.

DOI: 10.35631/IJLGC.1041056

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Abstract:

This study investigates the use of hedges and boosters in Malaysian sports columns, focusing on how evaluative stance is constructed in opinion discourse. Drawing on Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse framework, a manually compiled corpus of 44 sports articles from *The Star* and *New Straits Times* was analysed to identify patterns in the deployment of stance markers. Hedges and boosters were manually coded and categorized to determine their types and frequencies across both newspapers. A higher occurrence of hedges than boosters was found in both newspapers. The findings revealed a rhetorical preference for cautious expression, as indicated by the higher frequency of hedges compared to boosters. Type 1 hedges, primarily low-commitment modals such as *might*, *would* and *could*, were the most common, suggesting editorial tendencies that favour interpretive nuance over assertive commentary. Both publications exhibited similar strategic deployment of these linguistic resources, implying shared conventions within Malaysian sports journalism. These rhetorical choices contributed to the persuasive tone of sports commentary and reflect genre-specific preferences in stance-taking. The findings offered insights into journalistic style and may inform both editorial practice and journalism education. Future research could extend the analysis to digital platforms or explore stance variation across different sports genres.

Keywords:

Interactional Metadiscourse, Hedges, Boosters, Metadiscourse Markers, Hyland

Introduction

Sports column is a distinct genre within newspaper journalism, in which writers usually offer analysis, commentary, and a personal viewpoint on a particular sports topic. These narratives are more than just match reports; they also cover player profiles, team dynamics, coaching decisions, and provide deeper insights into the social impact of sports (Abdullah et al., 2020). Such articles educate, entertain, and foster conversations among readers with common athletic pursuits. They are written with precision and conviction, made possible through the use of hedges and boosters. The use of these linguistic resources enhances writers' skills in presenting their arguments and establishes their credibility. These metadiscourse markers improve persuasive clarity and support rhetorical stance, which are the key attributes of effective journalistic writing (Hyland, 2005).

Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model is especially pertinent because a writer's ability to argue their case convincingly and connect with readers depends not only on what they say but also how they say it. Metadiscourse refers to the language writers use to organize their text, present their stance, and interact with their readers. This framework is divided into two categories of interactional metadiscourse markers, namely **hedges** and **boosters**, which are essential for reflecting the writer's attitude or positioning. They enable writers to convey evaluative judgments, manage degrees of commitment, and shape how readers interpret claims, all of which are vital for maintaining rhetorical credibility and editorial tone. Strategically placing these markers influences how readers perceive the content. According to Hyland (2010), the use of metadiscourse markers reflects a writer's effort to make their text as coherent and convincing as possible, as well as to structure their arguments in a way that anticipates and aligns with their readers' knowledge and expectations of a clear and explicit text.

Hedges, such as "might," "could," "seem," "suggest," and "tend to" are linguistic devices used to express caution and uncertainty. In sport narratives, they are used to soften claims and make the author's voice sound less opinionated. For example, instead of stating a certainty, a writer might suggest that "*the team could encounter difficulties in the upcoming tournament.*" Conversely, boosters serve to increase certainty and conviction by allowing writers to emphasize key points and express strong opinions. Terms such as "clearly," "certainly," "undoubtedly," "obviously," and "*it is evidently that*" imbue a commentary with a sense of certainty and authority (Yeganeh et al., 2015; Batool et al., 2022). A writer might claim, "*It is obvious that the loss of the star player had a great effect on the performance of the team,*" to present an opinion. This statement highlights the element of injury. Sports writers can skillfully interweave both hedges and boosters to construct more subtle arguments that effectively engage readers, tactically positioning themselves as perceptive and knowledgeable commentators. The interplay of these two markers with rhetoric helps to construct a compelling and believable narrative. While Sundquist (2013) maintains that hedges allow for some ambiguity, their overuse can lead to unclear narratives. Similarly, when writing appear overly biased or forceful, readers may question the accuracy of the story. Using Hyland's (2005) interactional metadiscourse model as an analytical framework, this research investigates the types and frequencies of hedging and boosting expressions in sports columns from *The Star* and *New Straits Times*. Although metadiscourse in academic and journalistic writing has been widely studied, its use in Malaysian sports journalism is still underexplored. To create engaging and credible sports stories, writers rely on various linguistic strategies. However, studies on how hedges and boosters are used to shape rhetorical stance remain scarce. To address this gap, this study will compare the use of hedges and boosters in two major Malaysian newspapers,

The Star and *New Straits Times*, to uncover editorial preferences and the linguistic mechanisms that sports writers employ to influence readers' perception. By revealing how stance markers are used to shape credibility and engagement, the findings can inform editorial training and increase media literacy among readers. Accordingly, the research is guided by the following question: What types and frequencies of hedging and boosting expressions are used in sports columns of *The Star* and *New Straits Times*?

Literature Review

Metadiscourse analysis has its origins in Kopple's (1985) seminal taxonomy, which distinguished between textual functions that provide coherence in discourse and interpersonal functions that involve the reader and express attitude. His model emphasized that writers influence how readers interpret texts not only through content but also through signaling devices that guide interpretation. This early framework laid the groundwork for later refinements, most notably by Hyland (1998, 2005), who further developed this idea by creating a model that separates metadiscourse into interactive (how the text is organized) and interactional (how the writer shows stance and builds connection). Writers employ interactional markers, such as hedges and boosters, to convey their stance and confidence, which in turn shapes readers' reception. Within Malaysian journalism, several studies have used Hyland's metadiscourse model in various contexts. These studies reveal how writers use rhetorical devices like hedges and boosters to establish their stance or position on a topic. Table 1 summarizes key findings that inform the present analysis, showing how metadiscourse markers are used to express certainty, soften claims, and engage readers.

Table 1. Previous Studies on Interactional Metadiscourse

Author(s) & Year	Context	Focus	Key Findings	Relevance to Current Study
Hyland (2005)	Academic writing	Interactional metadiscourse (hedges and boosters).	Writers use hedges to express caution and boosters to assert claims; stance is genre- dependent.	Theoretical foundation for categorizing markers.
Hashim (2023)	Academic and journalistic articles	Modals as hedges and boosters	Boosters dominate in journalistic articles; hedges in academic articles.	Highlights stance strategies in journalistic genres.
Batool et al. (2022)	Pakistani newspaper editorials	Adverbial hedges in newspaper editorials	Frequent use of adverbial hedges is shaped by cultural expectations	Supports cross- cultural comparison of stance markers
Gribanova & Gaidukova	Speeches and interviews	Hedging in two distinct genres	Hedges mitigate controversial	Offers nuanced categorization of hedging devices

(2019)			claims	applicable to genre variation
Rahman et al. (2024)	Pakistani and American newspapers	Hedges and boosters in sports discourse	Hedges used to soften criticism and maintain politeness; boosters used to assert confidence	Demonstrates cultural differences in stance-taking strategies

These studies collectively underscore the dynamic role of hedges and boosters in shaping rhetorical stance across genres. They also highlight how cultural norms, communicative purpose, and editorial expectations influence metadiscourse choices. Such insights directly inform the current study's comparative focus on Malaysian sports columns, where stance-taking is central to constructing credibility and engaging readers. For instance, Hashim (2023) examined English modals functioning as hedging and boosting devices in academic and business journalism. She concluded that boosters often dominate in business narratives where conviction and assertiveness are prioritized. In a study by Crismore et al. (1993), students' writings were examined to determine how they employed hedges and boosters as a persuasive function. In another study that examined metadiscourse markers in scientific writing, Grabe and Kaplan (1997) found that writers use language that reflects precision and caution. Rahman et al. (2024), who studied sports columns in Pakistani and American newspapers' sports sections, found that lexical items such as "believe" and "never" signaled confidence, while modals like "would" and approximators like "about" conveyed uncertainty. These findings support the current study's use of boosters and hedging in sports commentary from *The Star* and *New Straits Times* as part of a wider metadiscourse analysis.

Disciplinary variation also plays a significant role. For instance, a comparative study of engineering and medical research articles showed that medical articles contain more hedges, while boosters tend to dominate in engineering (Sepehri et al., 2019). After examining eight academic disciplines, Takimoto (2015) reported that humanities texts employed the most hedges and boosters, while natural sciences employed the least. Gribanova and Gaidukova (2019) classified hedging strategies in political speeches as a reflection of the writer's communication goals and audience expectations. Their work revealed that the type of discourse or genre is the primary determinant of hedge use. These studies collectively show that metadiscourse is flexible and influenced by discipline and writing purpose.

More recently, attention has shifted toward journalism, where writers must persuade without appearing overtly biased. Yeganeh et al. (2014) examined news articles covering the pre- and post-Iranian presidential election in *The Washington Post* and *Keyhan* (an Iranian newspaper). They found that *Keyhan* used more boosters than hedges, suggesting that the newspaper was optimistic about the election results. Conversely, *The Washington Post* was less convinced about the outcome, which was indicated by its higher use of hedges than boosters. The findings revealed that sociopolitical context affects the balance of certainty and caution. Adverbial hedges such as "possibly," "likely," and "perhaps" are widely used in Pakistani opinion editorials (Batoool et al., 2022). This suggests that adverbial hedges are employed to express a balanced viewpoint. Abdullah et al. (2020) compared Malaysian and South Korean newspapers and found that hedges and boosters served both stylistic and cultural purposes in

news reports about the COVID-19 pandemic. In a comparative study conducted by Deng and He (2023), the findings showed significant differences in the deployment of hedges and boosters in the conclusion sections of English and Chinese research articles. They found that English research articles used more hedges and boosters compared to their Chinese counterparts. These findings confirm that metadiscourse markers are influenced by genre, audience, culture, and communication goals. Hedges and boosters are essential in demonstrating the strength of a statement. Boosters indicate a writer's degree of certainty and assurance in their stories, while hedges aid in softening that certainty. The previously mentioned studies collectively highlight the dynamic role of hedges and boosters in shaping how writers express certainty and connect with readers, especially in academic and journalistic writing. Additionally, they are shaped not only by genre and discipline but also by purpose and sociocultural setting.

In light of these findings, the present study adopts Hyland's (2005) interactional metadiscourse model to identify and explain how writers show their stance and guide reader engagement. This model is especially beneficial for examining how writers strike a balance between being persuasive and maintaining a neutral and professional tone. To address the gap, the present study applies Hyland's (2005) interactional framework to investigate hedging and boosting strategies in *The Star* and *New Straits Times*. By analyzing their frequency and type, this research contributes to a more detailed understanding of how Malaysian sports journalists construct rhetorical voice and credibility. This dimension has received scant attention in the existing literature.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design informed by genre analysis and metadiscourse theory.

Research Design

Sports journalism was chosen because it combines factual reporting with persuasive commentary, making the genre ideal for examining stance-taking. Data for this study were collected from the sport columns of *The Star* and *New Straits Times*. Approximately 60 articles were initially collected over one month. They were selected based on headlines that indicated relevance to national and international sporting events, athlete performance, and editorial commentary. The articles were then screened for genre suitability, with 44 articles retained for analysis. Match reports and informational pieces were excluded to ensure the corpus reflected evaluative and rhetorical content. In addition, manual coding was employed to identify interactional metadiscourse features, and intercoder reliability procedures were used to enhance analytical rigour. This design helps to explore how linguistic choices in Malaysian media reflect the media's goals and beliefs.

Corpus Compilation

The final corpus comprised 44 sports articles, evenly sampled from *The Star* and *New Straits Times*. The articles were selected based on headline relevance, evaluative content, and the writer's perspective. To ensure the data accurately reflected the topic, articles with a word count of 200-700 words and relevant thematic coverage were chosen.

Analytical Framework

Hyland's (2005) interactional metadiscourse model served as the primary analytical lens, specifically the categories of hedges (e.g. might, suggest, possible) and boosters (e.g. clearly, undeniably, in fact). These features were examined to understand how writers express certainty, soften claims, and position themselves in relation to readers.

Coding Procedure

All articles were manually coded based on Hyland's taxonomy. Coding categories include:

Hedges:

Type 1: Low-commitment modal auxiliaries (may, might, could, can, would)

Type 2: Introductory verbs (believe, assume, seen)

Type 3: Evaluative adjectives/adverbs (likely, possibly, apparently)

Boosters:

Type 1: High-commitment modals (must, should, have to, need to)

Type 2: Emphatic adverbials (definitely, certainly, obviously)

Type 3: Solidarity features (we all know, it is a fact)

To ensure reliability:

- A pilot coding of 10 articles was conducted by two independent coders
- Inter-coder agreement was assessed using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa=0.82$), indicating substantial reliability
- Discrepancies were resolved through collaborative discussion and reference to rhetorical context.

This coding process ensured consistency in marker identification and minimized interpretative bias.

Procedure

1. Text preparation: Articles were manually cleaned to remove advertisements, captions, and unrelated metadata.
2. Annotation: hedges and boosters were identified and tagged using a researcher-developed coding scheme based on Hyland's taxonomy.
3. Quantitative Analysis: Frequency counts were conducted to determine the distribution of hedges and boosters across the corpus
4. Qualitative Analysis: Selected excerpts were analysed to interpret rhetorical function, stance-taking, and reader engagement strategies.

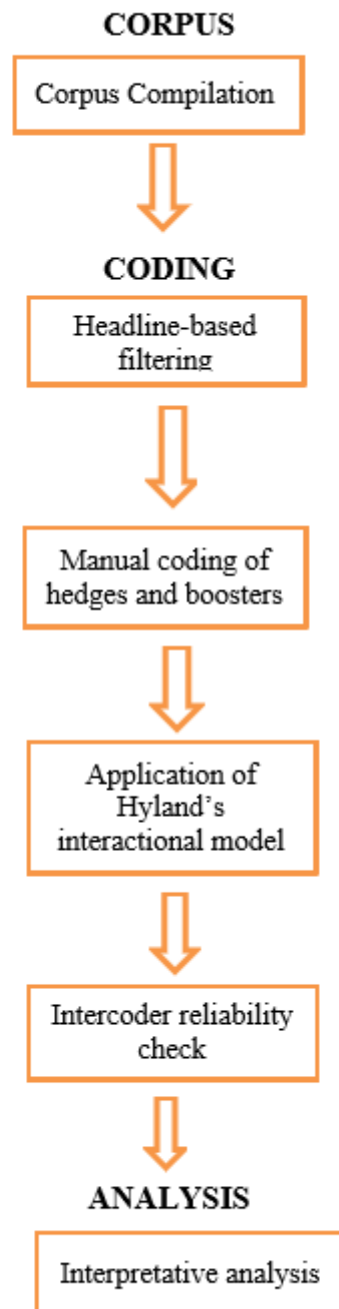


Figure 1: Methodological Flowchart for Corpus-based Analysis of Hedges and Boosters

The overall research process is summarized in Figure 1, which outlines the corpus selection, coding procedures, and analytical framework.

Ethical Considerations

All data used are publicly available and sourced from reputable news outlets. No personal or sensitive information was involved, and the study adhered to ethical standards for textual analysis.

Volume 10 Issue 41 (September 2025) PP. 851-863
DOI 10.35631/IJLGC.1041056

Limitations and Reflexivity

Several methodological limitations have been identified in this study. First, the data comprises 44 sports articles collected over a single month. Second, the articles were collected from The Star and New Straits Times exclusively. These limitations in the time frame and data source may limit the applicability of the findings across other periods, genres, or media platforms. Although manual coding was guided by a validated metadiscourse framework and supported by inter-coder reliability checks, interpretive bias cannot be entirely eliminated. These limitations serve as parameters that define the scope of the study rather as weaknesses. Future research could build on this study by broadening the corpus to include other media genres. Cross-linguistic comparisons could also be investigated to enhance the robustness of the results.

Findings and Discussion

A total of 44 articles from the sports columns of *The Star* and *New Straits Times* were collected and analyzed. The analysis revealed that the use of hedges is more prevalent than boosters in both newspapers.

Table 2. Hedges and boosters in <i>The Star</i> and <i>New Straits Times</i>					
Marker Type	The Star		New Straits Times		Dominant Function
	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	
Hedges	56	48	50	42	Tentative prediction, softening critique
Boosters	24	49	25	51	Emphasizing performance, expressing certainty

Table 2 provides a comparative analysis of the use of hedges in the sports columns of *The Star* and *New Straits Times*. Quantitative results showed that *The Star* sports articles contained a higher frequency of hedges than the *New Straits Times*, while boosters were evenly distributed across both sources. The slight difference in numbers can be attributed to the inherent nature of sports journalism, which often values cautious interpretation. Qualitative excerpts further illustrated how stance markers were strategically embedded to signal uncertainty in predictions and soften critique. For example, in a speculative framed commentary in *The Star*, the phrase, “*They **might** struggle in the finals*” appeared, while the *New Straits Times* used the softening critique approach, as seen in the phrase, “*It **seems** the strategy backfired.*” Boosters were used less frequently to assert claims and dramatize sporting outcomes. For example, The Star used the phrase, “*He **absolutely** dominated the match,*” and the New Straits Times used a phrase expressing certainty, “*There’s no doubt they **will** win.*”

Table 3. Distribution of Hedges in *The Star* and *New Straits Times*

Types of Hedges	Resources	The Star (f)	New Straits Times (f)
Type 1: Low commitment modal auxiliaries	May	4	3
	Might	1	1
	Could	9	9
	Can	18	15
	Would	8	13
	Total	40	41
Type 2: Introductor y verbs	Seem(s)	3	1
	Suggest(s)	0	0
	Appear(s)	0	0
	Believe	7	5
	Assume(s)	0	1
	Total	10	7
Type 3: Adjectives and adverbs	Possible / possibly	1	2
	Likely	2	0
	Probably	2	0
	Presumably	0	0
	Perhaps	1	0
	Apparently	0	0
	Total	6	2
Grand total		56	50

The quantitative analysis revealed a consistent preference for hedging devices across both newspapers. The findings in Table 3 show that Type 1 hedges are the most common metadiscourse markers in the *New Straits Times*, with 41 occurrences. Likewise, *The Star* demonstrates the same trend, with Type 1 hedges occurring most frequently at 40 occurrences. This trend highlights the predominance of Type 1 hedges, which are low-commitment modal auxiliaries such as "may," "might," "could," "can," and "would." The prevalence of Type 1 hedges indicates a conscious editorial preference for detailed interpretation and cautious declarations, thereby preserving the story's accuracy and credibility.

Examples:

1. "*The contingent **can** hope for more medals ...*"
(Malaysian shuttlers bag bronze in mixed team event, *The Star*)
2. "*He **would** always give his best ...*"
(Rexy pays emotional tribute to the late Teik Chai, *New Straits Times*)

For Type 2 hedges, *The Star* uses the introductory verb "believe" more than the *New Straits Times*, followed by "seem" and "assume." Introductory verbs such as "believe" or "assume" align with journalistic norms that emphasize cautious interpretation over definitive statements. This allows journalists to express evaluative judgments subtly.

Examples:

1. “*They **seem** to be struggling with ...*”
(Aaron-Wooi Yik save Malaysia the blushes Down Under, The Star)
2. “*I **believe** we have done our best ...*”
(Hendrawan keeps Tze Yong’s indomitable spirit up, The Star)

Additionally, an analysis of Type 3 hedges (adjectives and adverbs) found that *The Star* uses these hedges three times more often than the *New Straits Times*.

Examples:

1. “*... **perhaps** because the race ...*”
(Aaron-Wooi Yik save Malaysia the blushes Down Under, The Star)
2. “*Out of 10 players, we will **probably** have only one Justin ...*”
(Being fast-tracked too soon has cost Justin dearly, says his former coach, The Star)
3. “*Zii Jia is **likely** to survive the qualifying ...*”
(Aaron-Wooi Yik seek much needed boast in Sydney before world title defence, The Star)

The use of both Type 2 and Type 3 hedges suggests a stylistic inclination towards presenting nuanced inferences rather than definitive stances, perhaps to preserve the perception of impartiality among a broader readership.

Table 4. Distribution of boosters in *The Star* and *New Straits Times*

Types of Boosters	Resources	The Star (f)	New Straits Times (f)
Type 1: High commitment modals	Must	2	4
	Should	8	9
	Have to	5	3
	Need to	8	6
	Total	23	22
Type 2: Adjectives and adverbs	Certainly	0	1
	Definitely	1	2
	Obviously	0	0
	Total	1	3
Type 3: Solidarity features	It is well known	0	0
	It is a fact	0	0
	We all know	0	0
	Total	0	0
Grand total		24	25

On the other hand, the findings in Table 4 show that the use of boosters in both *The Star* and the *New Straits Times* is half the number of hedges in the sports articles. The findings indicate that Type 1 boosters are the most common marker used in both newspapers. Type 1 boosters are high-commitment modals that include words or phrases such as “must,” “should,” “have to,” and “need to,” which implement a higher degree of commitment or obligation. The use of high-commitment modals is responsible for the nuanced nature of language expression, as writers vary their level of commitment to a proposition or the necessity of a situation depending on the context and the message they are conveying.

Examples:

1. “...*he **should** not the only one to be blamed ...*”
(BAM defend decision to keep Remy following Asian Junior flop, *The Star*)
2. “*The coaches **will** need strong backing ...*”
(BAM defend decision to keep Remy following Asian Junior flop, *The Star*)
3. “... *he **would** relinquish his position ...*”
(Norza to step down as BAM boss, *New Straits Times*)
4. “*Some **may** say Zii Jia is vulnerable ...*”
(Jun Hao wants to inflict more misery on Zii Jia, *New Straits Times*)

For Type 2 boosters, the *New Straits Times* used more boosters than *The Star*, with words such as “definitely” and “certainly.” This may be because the *New Straits Times* uses a more precise editorial style that employs adverbials of emphasis to convey certainty. The use of boosters such as “definitely” and “certainly” shows that writers are making a deliberate choice to project authority and assert their voice, which is common in opinion-driven sports narratives.

Examples:

1. “*I’m **definitely** not happy with how they played ...*”
(Aaron-Wooi Yik save Malaysia the blushes Down Under, *The Star*)
2. “*Zii Jia is **frequently** losing matches ...*”
(Jun Hao wants to inflict more misery on Zii Jia, *New Straits Times*)

Regarding Type 3 boosters, neither newspaper used them in their news reporting.

The strategic application of Type 1 hedges and boosters in *The Star* and *New Straits Times* is an editorial strategy involving careful word selection without altering the facts. The findings reveal new details about how articles are structured and suggest further investigation into how linguistic choices influence audience perception and journalistic authority.

Limitations of the Study

This study is delimited by several aspects, including the sample size of newspaper articles reviewed and the lack of references. This sample, collected from only one month of publications, is also geographically focused on Malaysia, specifically on two English newspapers. One must recognize that the findings were taken from such a restricted sample, and they may not capture the inherent diversity and nuances of the broader population. Considering these limitations, the generalizability and robustness of the outcomes in this study may be at risk. As a result, the findings may misrepresent the general trends and dynamics of the targeted population.

Furthermore, the absence of comparative studies analyzing newspaper articles on sport adds a further limitation to the study. Without existing research that could be used as a reference point or benchmark, researchers may struggle to contextualize their findings and interpret the significance of their observations. This further emphasizes the need for care and prudence when drawing conclusions from the data, as the absence of comparative data may constrict the ability to observe trends, patterns, or discrepancies in the coverage of sports across different newspapers.

Recommendations

The first recommendation is for editorial staff to receive training on how to improve the rhetorical quality of their work. From the viewpoint of a newspaper journalist, certain subtle or complex aspects of the sports sector may be missed or misunderstood. Receiving training would lead to clearer articles and more engaged readers.

Second, studies on metadiscourse markers should be conducted to include a broader range of media such as online newspapers and sports blogs. This would allow for an in-depth understanding of how metadiscourse works in the creation of sports narratives across different platforms and audiences.

Thirdly, in the Malaysian context, the study of metadiscourse is still new, and research on Malaysian newspapers has not been widely conducted. Apart from sports genres, other newspaper genres could also show a trend in the use of metadiscourse markers, which would offer a wide range of future research opportunities.

Lastly, journalism education in universities and colleges can benefit by incorporating stance awareness into their writing modules. This would involve using authentic column excerpts to highlight how linguistic choices shape a writer's evaluative tone and audience perception.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of hedges and boosters in Malaysian sports columns to uncover how evaluative stance is linguistically constructed across two major newspapers. The findings confirm that both *The Star* and *New Straits Times* exhibit consistent rhetorical preferences, with hedges used to soften claims or introduce alternative perspectives and boosters to express certainty. These patterns reflect broader editorial strategies and contribute to our understanding of stance-taking in journalistic genres.

While the corpus was limited to sports articles from *The Star* and *New Straits Times*, the analysis offers a foundation for future comparative studies across regional or digital platforms. The study contributes to the field of sports journalism by highlighting how linguistic choices shape the overall tone of an article. Future research could explore stance variation across sports types or investigate reader reception of hedging and boosting strategies in opinion discourse.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the International Journal of Law, Government and Communication (IJLGC) for the esteemed opportunity of publication. The second author extends his appreciation to his parents and family, especially his sister, Nurul Fatimah, and his friends, Izzati Aqilah, Farrah Liyana and Nur Hazirah. This study did not receive any funding.

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