
A Corpus-Assisted Study of Media Power of Referee's Reputation in Indonesia vs Bahrain Controversy

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Article Info

Article History:
Received September 2025
Accepted October 2025
Published March 2026

Keywords:

appraisal theory, corpus-assisted discourse studies, media power, referee controversy, socio-cognitive approach

Abstract

This study explores the significant role of media discourse in shaping a public figure's reputation, focusing on the refereeing controversy during the Indonesia vs Bahrain World Cup Qualifiers 2026 round three match. Using a corpus-assisted qualitative approach, this research analyzed 28 English-language news articles (14,132 tokens) published in one week following the match. The data analysis was conducted using a combination of corpus linguistic tools (frequency lists and KWIC analysis) and was interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Appraisal Theory and Socio-Cognitive Approach. The findings reveal that news media constructed a powerful and overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the referee. Specifically, the referee's "decision" was consistently framed with negative Appreciation, while the "complaint" was represented as an expression of Affect and Judgment. This study concludes that through these specific linguistic choices, the media used its power to shape public opinion, which contributed to crucial consequences, specifically to the referee's professional career.

INTRODUCTION

As a globally beloved sport, football has gained its popularity in Indonesia, largely driven by the nation's success in hosting several international matches. The 2023 U-17 World Cup, for instance, was a successful match that had a significant positive impact on the country (Antara, 2023). This rapid enthusiasm growth is reflected as Indonesia becomes the third-largest football fan base in the world, following Brazil and Uruguay. With an impressive 165.4 million fans, equivalent to 60% of its total population (Adhiansyah, 2025), the popularity of football in Indonesia is clearly on the rise. This enthusiastic fan base is further fueled by the national team's improving performance. Historic achievements, such as their first victory against China in 38 years and breaking into the FIFA top 100 rankings in their latest match. Furthermore, their remarkable run in the World Cup qualifiers, by becoming the first ASEAN team to advance to the fourth round after securing the highest points in the third round among all ASEAN nations (CNBC Indonesia, 2025).

Within this passionate environment, the referee stands as a central and powerful figure, whose decisions are crucial for ensuring the smooth flow of a match. However, the sport's nature often gives rise to controversy, making referees a frequent subject of intense public scrutiny, leading to sharp criticism. A prime example of this occurred during the third round of World Cup Qualifiers 2026 match between Indonesia and Bahrain, where a referee's decision sparked a major controversy and led to sharp criticism from fans, officials, and players who felt treated unfairly.

The way this controversy unfolded highlights the significant power of the media in shaping public opinion (Dijk, 2014). Instead of just reporting facts, journalists play a key role in defining how an issue is understood, influencing how society views a particular issue. Through their choice of words, tone, and focus, the media can highlight specific aspects of an issue, which directly affects public's emotions and judgment towards the individuals involved (Khaer et al., 2025). This makes media become a powerful tool in constructing social reality, where a single event can be presented in multiple ways, leading to different public understanding and reactions (Chistyakov, 2020). This can also have a powerful impact on an individual's reputation and career, as public opinion is largely shaped by how events are portrayed in the media.

Numerous studies have explored the use of linguistic features and theories to uncover the attitudes, power dynamics, and ideologies across various contexts. For

example, Fajri (2019) used corpus-assisted discourse analysis to investigate how Indonesian Muslims are represented in American News. Harti and Kurniawati (2020) focused on students' emotional expression about the COVID-19 pandemic, using Appraisal Theory to categorize data based on affect, judgment, and appreciation. In another study, Andriani and Belkis (2024) examined how *Kumparan* news media portrays the government education policy, concluding that the media serves as a form of power and dominance to shape public opinion.

This paper investigated how English-language media portrayed the refereeing controversy during the World Cup Qualifiers 2026 match between Indonesia and Bahrain, utilizing a corpus-assisted approach to identify specific linguistic features constructed in this portrayal. The study aims to bridge the gap in understanding how media shape of a specific issue, driven by how specific linguistic resources, such as word collocations, construct this portrayal through Appraisal Theory. Furthermore, it explored how these media illustrate underlying ideologies and power relations that contribute to the social impact on the referee's career using the Socio-Cognitive Approach. The study's findings contributed to linguistics, sociology, and media ethics by illustrating how media narratives influence public perception and affect people's lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies

Numerous studies provided a strong foundation for analyzing media discourse through various linguistic lenses. For instance, Fajri (2019) utilized a corpus-assisted discourse analysis to investigate how Muslims and Islam were represented in American newspapers, revealing that the dominant discourses are largely associated with terrorism, fundamentalism, conflict, and violence. Another study, Harti and Kurniawati (2020) focused on students' expression of attitude regarding COVID-19 pandemic by using Martin and White's Appraisal Theory. In a different context, Andriani and Belkis (2024) employed Dijk's critical discourse analysis to examine how the Indonesian news outlet, *Kumparan* portrayed the government's policy on face-to-face learning due to COVID-19, finding that the media exercised its power and dominance by prioritizing the voice of the more powerful group to shape public opinion. While these studies established frameworks for analyzing media power and evaluative language, no study has yet combined these ideas to see how media power was used to build a person's professional reputation during a major

sports controversy. This research uncovered how the media used its power to influence the public's view of the referee's competence and character.

Appraisal Theory

The first framework used was Appraisal Theory, developed by Martin and White (2005) as part of Systemic Functional Linguistics. This theory explores how attitudes and evaluations were expressed through language. It's divided into three parts: Affect, which focuses on emotional language; Appreciation, which evaluates non-human things; and Judgment, which was the primary focus of this research, as it is used to evaluate people's behavior based on social norms.

In the context of a news article, Appraisal Theory is a tool for understanding how language is used to create judgments and opinions that shape the way readers see an issue. For instance, specific words, tone, and intensity chosen by journalists can frame a person or situation positively or negatively, which helps form public opinion. The theory also looks at how news articles engage with their audience, either aligning or even challenging certain viewpoints, to build a sense of shared values.

Socio-Cognitive Approach

After using Appraisal Theory to identify the specific linguistic evaluation in the data, the researchers conducted a further analysis using a Socio-Cognitive Approach to understand the key aspects of media power. This second framework, outlined by Dijk (2008), was essential for understanding social power as the control of a group over the actions and beliefs of others. The focus of this approach is beliefs and ideologies, linking discourse with social structures.

This approach helps analyze news articles by looking at how language connects to thought and society. It suggests that news texts are shaped by the shared knowledge and ideologies of the journalists and their sources. The specific language media use then constructs a particular social reality for the reader, which in turn influences public understanding and reinforces existing power relationships in society.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing a case study methodology. According to Creswell (2018), a case study is an in-depth analysis of an event bounded by time and place, which was appropriate for this study's focus on a specific controversy. The subject of this case study was the referee.

The study used a corpus-assisted qualitative approach to investigate the patterns surrounding the controversy. While an initial corpus analysis provided a foundation of word frequency, the research delved deeper to explore how linguistic choices were used to construct meaning and ideology. The primary method was Keyword in Context (KWIC) analysis. This allowed for a detailed examination of linguistic features in their original context, revealing how specific words and phrases presented the referee's decisions and the public's emotional responses.

Research Instruments

In this qualitative study, the researcher was the primary research instrument for collecting and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2023). The data was collected using qualitative observation, which involved the researcher carefully noted and documented the linguistic features and content within the selected news articles that formed the data corpus (Creswell, 2018). To support this process, the researcher also utilized software tools. JustText demo website was used to clean the raw news articles by removing irrelevant content like emojis and advertisements. This cleaned text was then gathered into a single plain text (txt.) file, and LancsBox software was used to generate the wordlist from the corpus for analysis.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, the data was used Rich, Thick Description. This approach involves providing detailed examples from the data and interpreting how the language construct meaning, which help to present the linguistic evidence clearly within its context (Creswell, 2023). This study used Appraisal Theory for a detailed analysis of the specific word choices that built the referee's reputation. It also used a Socio-Cognitive Approach for a broader understanding of media power and ideology. By utilizing both linguistic and social approaches, the credibility and validity of the findings were strengthened.

Research Procedure

The research was conducted through distinct stages of preparation, data collection, and data analysis. The research preparation involved compiling a corpus of English-language news articles that reported on the Indonesia vs Bahrain refereeing controversy. The articles were gathered over one week following the match on October 10, 2024, to capture the immediate media response to the controversy. Following this, the data was collected through a process of observation, which involved using specific terms to find and collect all relevant news into the final corpus for analysis. The researcher used JustText

demo website to clean the articles, removing any irrelevant content. This process successfully compiled a corpus of 28 news articles and 14,132 tokens that were deemed highly relevant to the topic of the controversy. This approach was employed because the primary goal of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) is to uncover hidden meanings in the text (Partington, 2010). This helps to clearly see how the news typically portrays the people and events.

The data analysis was then conducted in several detailed steps. First, key tokens were selected for analysis from the Top 20 Noun List, namely “decision” and “complaint”. These tokens were chosen because they are linguistically and sociologically central to the core of the controversy. Next, collocation analysis was performed using the LancsBox software to identify words that most frequently co-occurred with these key tokens. Following this, KWIC analysis was used to examine each selected token within its original sentence context. Finally, the data from the KWIC analysis were interpreted through the lens of Appraisal Theory and the Socio-Cognitive Approach. This theoretical application involved identifying and classifying words that expressed Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation, then connecting these linguistic patterns to the broader media portrayal and power relations of the news outlets.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the analysis of the corpus data compiled from news articles reporting the Indonesia vs Bahrain refereeing controversy. This study utilizes Appraisal Theory and the Socio-Cognitive Approach to interpret the findings. The first section details the linguistic analysis, showing how specific language choices create meaning. The second section discusses how these language patterns influence public opinion and the social impact on the referee’s reputation.

The initial analysis began by generating a word frequency list from the 14,132 tokens corpus using LancsBox to identify the most common words. Based on part of speech, this research focuses specifically on the most common nouns. Table 1 presents the top 20 most frequent nouns below:

Table 1. Top 20 Most Frequent Nouns

No	Type	Freq	No	Type	Freq
1.	match	183	11.	cup	79
2.	bahrain	182	12.	fifa	65
3.	indonesia	168	13.	afc	59
4.	referee	155	14.	goal	58
5.	minute	112	15.	ahmed	52
6.	time	98	16.	pssi	48
7.	decision	90	17.	game	47
8.	football	87	18.	complaint	42
9.	team	85	19.	player	40
10.	world	82	20.	controversy	38

While words like “Bahrain”, “Indonesia”, and “referee” are the most frequent, this study focuses on the nouns “decision” and “complaint” in a deeper analysis. These two tokens were selected because they are argued to be the most linguistically and sociologically crucial to the controversy’s core.

Analysis of “Decision”: Evaluating the Action through Appreciation

“Decision” reveals how the media framed the referee’s actions, as this is the root cause of the controversy. Here, the referee’s “decision” is portrayed as a process that is consistently evaluated in negative terms. In Appraisal theory, this term aligns with Appreciation, evaluation of things, events, or processes (Martin & White, 2005). A collocation analysis showed that “decision” was often paired with words that expressed negative qualities and values. This pattern of word choice frames the controversy not as a simple disagreement, but also as a reaction to the referee’s poor professional quality. The Keyword in Context (KWIC) analysis shows a clear example:

Table 2. KWIC Analysis of “Decision”

FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers the referee’s	decision	was <i>biased</i> and I think everyone understands
I have to bring up the <i>embarrassing</i>	decision	made by the referee.
A strong protest, arguing that the referee’s	decision	had put them at an <i>unfair</i> disadvantage.

In these examples, the “Decision” is directly described with strong negative judgments like *biased*, *embarrassing*, and *unfair*. These words clearly reflect negative appreciation. By repeatedly using these types of descriptions, the news articles construct the referee’s action as fundamentally unprofessional.

Analysis of “Complaint”: Expressing Affect and Making a Judgment

The word “complaint” is powerful because it contains two appraisals at once. It shows emotion and makes a judgment at the same time. According to Martin and White (2005), language can express Affect, which relates to emotions like happiness or dissatisfaction, and Judgment, is about evaluating people’s behavior based on social norms. The use of “complaint” in the articles addresses both of these issues. The act of complaining comes from a feeling of dissatisfaction (Affect), but it also serves a negative Judgment of the referee’s professionalism. The following KWIC analysis illustrates this dual functionality:

Table 3. KWIC Analysis of “Complaint”

The Indonesian national team, which is <i>dissatisfied</i> with the decision.... has sent an official letter of	complaint	to the AFC.
Indonesian Football Association is reportedly considering filling a formal	complaint	against the officiating, echoing past <i>grievances</i> about refereeing decisions
PSSI would file a letter of	complaint	to FIFA on Friday morning. “We are <i>very disappointed</i> with the refereeing,”

In the first and third examples, the “complaint” explicitly describes the emotions of dissatisfaction and disappointment (“dissatisfied”, “very disappointed”), which clearly express negative Affect. All three examples then present the formal action taken by the Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI). This formal protest judges the referee’s performance as either incompetent or unfair, damaging their professional image.

Media Power and Socio-Cognitive Effect

News media consistently used language to build a powerful and very negative story around the referee. Dijk (2008) argues that discourse is a key tool for powerful groups to control the “minds of the public”. The news articles do more than just report; they actively shape the social cognition of the audience (Khaer et al., 2025). They create a “preferred” mental model for readers (Dijk, 2008), one in which the referee is clearly the one to blame.

As powerful institutions, news outlets have special access and control over public discourse (Andriani & Belkis, 2024). They decide which people are represented and how their actions are described (Dijk, 2008). In this case, the media gave a platform to PSSI officials and framed their “complaint” as a reaction to an “unfair” and “embarrassing” decision. This makes the story seem credible and powerful, while the referee has no voice. Dijk (2008) describes this kind of power abuse domination, where powerful groups use

discourse to influence people in a way that serves their own interests and leads to social inequality.

The social consequences of this issue were very real and terrible. The widespread negative portrayal contributed to the referee, Ahmed Al Kaf, being publicly labeled as a “controversial referee in Asia”, a damaging title that directly hurt his career (KapanLagi, 2024). Ultimately, he was eventually also removed from his duties with the Asian Elite Champions League on October 21, 2024 (VOI, 2024). This illustrates how powerfully public opinion, shaped by the media, can influence social reality. In the end, his professional reputation was ruined, not just because of what happened during the game itself, but because of the powerful media portrayal around it. This serves as a clear example of how the words used in the news can turn a single controversy into real-world consequences, demonstrating the media’s power to shape reality and deeply impact an individual’s life.

CONCLUSION(S)

This study clearly shows the power of media discourse by revealing how specific linguistic choices in news articles can construct an individual’s reputation and lead to drastic real-world consequences. Using Appraisal Theory and Socio-Cognitive Approach, the analysis showed that the media did not merely report the Indonesia vs Bahrain refereeing controversy, but they actively shaped the story. The consistent use of negative Appreciation to describe the referee’s “decision” and portrayal of the “complaint” as an expression of Affect and Judgment created a one-sided and powerful narrative that portrayed the referee as incompetent and unprofessional. As aligns with the Socio-Cognitive framework, this linguistic strategy role in shaping public opinion and permits institutional action against the referee, ultimately contributing to the damage of his career.

Based on these findings that this study focused only on English-language news article, future research could explore several interesting areas. Comparing this analysis with Indonesia-language news coverage of the same event could reveal important differences in framing or intensity. Additionally, examining fans reaction on social media platforms would also offer valuable insights into how these media narratives were received and spread in public. Investigating these aspects would provide a comprehensive analysis of how media language and public discourse interact to shape reality in the world of international football.

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