

EXPLORING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN USING METADISOURSE FOR POLITICAL OPINION WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Metadiscourse marker is one of the most commonly-used linguistic devices in persuasive writing, and it shapes writer's arguments to the needs and expectations of the target readers. Research has consistently shown that women, on average, are less politically interested, informed, and efficacious than men. However, this does not necessarily imply that male columnists are more persuasive than female columnists when writing political opinion articles. Hence, the present study aims to investigate how male and female columnists use metadiscourse markers in political opinion writing to effectively direct their political views toward their readers.

Methodology: This descriptive study used frequency analysis, comparative analysis, and a semi-structured interview with eight ardent readers to examine metadiscourse markers used by male and female columnists in their political opinion articles, as well as the impact of persuasion on their readers. 100 opinion articles about Malaysia's 14th general election were chosen from two English-language online newspaper portals in Malaysia, The Star and the New Straits Times.

Findings: The findings revealed that female columnists employed more metadiscourse markers than male columnists. Respondents concluded that articles with more metadiscourse markers used in the text, particularly in the interpersonal category, appeared to be more persuasive. Furthermore, the findings indicated that female columnists presented a more convincing image than those produced by

male columnists.

Contributions: As research conducted on gender differences in political writing is still rare, this research provided information regarding gender preferences in using metadiscourse markers in political opinion articles. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by informing researchers and opinion writers about the many types of metadiscourse markers that may be used to establish rapport between writers and readers.

Keywords: Metadiscourse markers, persuasive writing, gender, male, female, political-opinion articles.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to UN Woman (2021), females' equal participation and leadership in political and public life are essential to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. However, data have shown that females are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide, and achieving gender parity in political life is far off. Furthermore, past scholarship has documented that females tend to know less about politics than males (Sanbonmatsu, 2003), and this has become one of the most fundamental and long-running debates in political science (Barabas et al., 2014; Jerit & Barabas, 2017). Previous studies have also shown that females were less politically interested, informed, and efficacious than males (Asekere, 2021; Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Daby, 2020; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). In Malaysia, lack of party supports, family supports, and the "masculine model" of political life were the main challenges confronting females entering politics (Wan Azizah, 2002). While the perception of females' political participation is focused on their representation in political institutions, little is known about their political interest in providing information to the public on political events, engaging people to get involved in political activities, and sharing opinions about political issues. In Malaysia, one of the channels for females to participate in political discussion is through newspaper opinion articles. Studies on gender in writing are still scarce despite its importance in the English language. To date, only a few studies (Seyyedrezaie & Vahedi, 2017; Ghafoori & Oghbatalab, 2012; Yeganeh & Ghoreyshi, 2015; Zadeh, Baharlooei, & Simin, 2015) have investigated the role of gender in writing. Hence, the objectives of the study are to investigate

male and female columnists' political interests through opinion writing in newspapers and examine the persuasion effects of males' and females' political opinions on their readers.

According to Van Dijk (1998), opinion article in newspapers is one of the subgenres of persuasive text aiming to persuade and convince the readers through writing. The success of writing this section of text depends on the writer's ability and expertise in putting balance to their purpose of giving information and persuading their readers (Permana Sukma & Sari Sujatna, 2014). Opinion article writers need to ensure that their ideas are well organized and the sentences used can establish rapport between them and the readers. They need to know the issue discussed to attain persuasive goals and to convince their readers. An opinion article writer with good persuasive writing techniques is believed to attract more readers, as they are more likely to convince their readers with their ideas. In this study, persuasive writings were examined in the discourse of newspaper opinion articles written by columnists or experts on political issues in Malaysia during the 14th General Election in 2018. The use of newspaper opinion articles concerning the topic of the Malaysian 14th General Election was due to its popularity in opinion articles witnessing the story of political shifts after over six decades of undefeated power, as well as its strong persuasive nature. The sharing of political opinion in the newspaper was ubiquitous during the election campaign and even after the election. The linguistic element known as metadiscourse markers was used in this study as the indicator of how writers project their persuasion and direct readers to the main points of their writing.

Metadiscourse markers are a linguistic device used by writers to guide readers through the text and establish a means for the writers to interact with or influence the readers (Sanford, 2012). According to Hyland (2004), metadiscourse in the text refers to the linguistic devices that writers employed to shape their arguments to the needs and expectations of their target readers. In a similar vein, Dafouz (2008) has defined metadiscourse in writing as features that writers include to help readers decode the message, share the writers' views, and reflect the particular conventions that are followed in a given culture. Additionally, Dafouz (2008) mentioned that the key feature of metadiscourse is explicitness because it represents the writer's overt attempt to create a particular discursal effect. Thus, the markers can include various types and forms, ranging from a single word to a full sentence, several sentences, or even a whole paragraph. However, the writers need to consider that the metadiscourse markers employed particularly in writing are not independent linguistic devices where the writers can vary at will and appear in many types and forms.

Saadi and Roosta (2014) supported Halliday's (1998) claim that metadiscourse is integral to the contexts in which it occurs, and is intimately linked to the norms and

expectations of particular cultural and professional communities. Metadiscourse markers ensure writers' engagement with their readers, and they convey their messages effectively. In order to identify and select the right metadiscourse markers in writing, several taxonomies on metadiscourse markers have been proposed since the early interest on this topic decades ago. Among the numerous taxonomies proposed include Vande Kopple (1985), Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993), Beauvais (1989), Hyland (2005), Dafouz (2003), and many more. According to Dafouz (2008), these taxonomies classified and organized the linguistic units under the functional headings of textual and interpersonal metadiscourse.

Hyland (1998) postulates that textual metadiscourse allows the recovery of the writer's intention by explicitly establishing preferred interpretations of propositional meanings, whereas interpersonal metadiscourse alerts readers to the writer's perspective towards both the propositional information and the readers themselves, thus contributing to the writer-reader relationship. The interpersonal function is the use of language to encode interaction, allowing us to engage with others, to take on roles and to express and understand evaluations and feelings. Textual function is the use of language to organize the text itself, coherently relate what is said to the words and others. In newspaper discourse, interpersonal metadiscourse markers can be used to attain persuasive goals (Permana Sukma & Sari Sujatna, 2014), and they are divided into five categories, which are hedges, certainty markers, attributors, attitude markers, and commentaries. Meanwhile, textual metadiscourse are divided into seven categories, which are logical markers, sequences, reminders, topicalisers, code glosses, illocutionary markers, and announcements (Dafouz, 2003). In this study, researchers investigated the use of interpersonal and textual metadiscourse markers by male and female columnists to create persuasive language in political opinion articles.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion between language and gender is inseparable (Eckert, 1992). Since decades ago, many scholars have discussed the differences in the language used between males and females (Eckert, 2013; Newman et al., 2008; Reilly, Neumann, & Andrews, 2019; Yang et al., 2020). One of the most prominent scholars in gender study is Robin Lakoff. According to Lakoff (1973), females and males use language differently to some extent. For instance, females' use of language was characterized to have more hedges and tag questions since society expects them to be more polite. In contrast, males were allowed to use coarse and direct language. A study conducted by Argamon et al. (2003) found that the use of pronouns and informative terms distinguished texts written by female and male writers. Female writers tend to use a greater

number of pronouns in their writing, whereas male writers use more informative terms. Moreover, female writers prefer to encode the relationship between the writer and the reader, specifically through the use of first-person singular and second-person pronouns. Hence, they are more likely to use pronouns in their writing compared to male writers. In consideration of the different writing styles between female and male writers, both genders have been predicted to employ different types of metadiscourse markers in persuasive writing.

For decades, the topic of gender differences has been proved to be a popular line of inquiry for researchers, and the recent growing interest in the pervasive phenomenon of metadiscourse has elevated it to a major domain in the research of discourse analysis and corpus-based analyses (Alsubhi, 2016). Despite numerous studies on metadiscourse markers in text, research on these markers in journalistic texts has received little attention in discourse analysis research. In fact, only a few researchers have examined the issues surrounding these markers (Dafouz, 2003, 2008; Le, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how male and female columnists use different metadiscourse markers in newspaper political discourse, and the degree of persuasiveness between male and female writing styles on readers. In addition, this study also aims to shed light on the participation of females in political opinion writing.

3.0 METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative research used a mixed method approach to gather data, in which it allows for the collection of multiple types of data by counterbalancing the weaknesses of the single method approach. Data collected from newspapers and readers were analysed using frequency analysis, comparative analysis, and thematic analysis.

3.2 Data Collection

First, the researchers collected 100 English political opinion articles written by male and female columnists from the online newspaper portals to examine the metadiscourse markers used. Second, the researchers identified 6 opinion articles with the greatest variety of metadiscourse markers found in the texts, and conducted a semi-structured interview with eight readers to ascertain their thoughts on the political opinion articles. Data were collected six months before the 14th Malaysian General Election.

3.2.1 The Selection of Newspaper Corpus

The newspaper opinion articles used for the discourse analysis were collected from the top two Malaysian English newspapers' online portals. The ranking of the newspapers was retrieved from an online website (<http://www.4imn.com/my/>). This website provides a complete ranking of newspapers from each country worldwide based on readers' popularity. In Malaysia, the top two most popular English online newspapers with the highest number of readers are The Star and New Straits Times. Therefore, the opinion articles were collected from these two respective online newspaper portals.

3.2.2 The Selection of Newspaper Political Opinions Articles

For the investigation of metadiscourse markers used by the writers, data were collected from The Star and New Straits Times online portal during the 14th Malaysian General Election. Firstly, in order to obtain the right political opinion articles for this study, the researchers had to observe the title and the overall theme of the articles. The researchers studied the articles closely to identify whether the writers have presented the propositional materials in the most convincing and interesting ways to their potential audience. The researchers further confirmed whether the writers had created their credible textual persona to develop an appropriate attitude towards the readers and the claims they presented (Dafouz, 2008).

The researchers screened the newspapers' opinion articles from both online newspaper portals in terms of word count to ensure that the length of the articles was controlled. The word count is important for measuring the length of the articles and ensuring that they are all standardized, with no one article being longer or shorter than the others. Hence, for this study, only articles with a word count of around 700-1000 were selected for this study, and the average time spent on reading each article was 5-8 minutes.

In order to select a reliable sample size for this study, the researchers used Raosoft Sample Size Calculator to calculate the sample size. The recommended sample size by Raosoft was 100 based on a 95% confidence level. Out of 134 articles that met the above criteria, a total of 100 political opinion articles written by 68 different writers were selected through the Simple Random method for the study. The 100 random numbers were generated through Random Number Generator. Due to the disproportionate number of entries, the number of articles selected from each newspaper was varied. The majority of entries for opinion articles on political topics concerning the Malaysian general election were collected from The Star newspaper, which is easily accessible through their online portal. Therefore, 64 opinion articles were selected from The Star, while 36 opinion articles were selected from New Straits Times.

Male and female writers account for half of the writers in these 100 papers. The purpose of selecting articles from both genders is to compare and contrast the use of metadiscourse markers in political opinion writing by male and female columnists.

On the other hand, for the interview purposes, six political opinion articles were selected from the 100 articles based on the variety of metadiscourse markers in the text. Three of the six articles were written by male columnists, while the other three were written by female columnists. Table 1 summarizes the six selected opinion articles.

Table 1: Title of opinion articles selected for short interview

Article No.	Title of Opinion Article
A (1)	In Unity We Find Strength
A (2)	Malaysia in the Eyes of the World
A (3)	Depoliticizing the System Here in Malaysia
A (4)	Let's Stop the "hatewave"
A (5)	New Malaysia, Old Politics
A (6)	Wising Up to A Whale of a Tale

3.2.3 The Selection of Participants and Interview Procedure

A semi-structured interview with eight readers to investigate the writing styles and metadiscourse markers distribution between male and female columnists' that influence readers' understanding and views of the text. Respondents were chosen based on purposive sampling adhering to two criteria, which are the respondents are ardent political discourse readers with an excellent level of English proficiency from a public university, and they aged between 20 – 23 years old. All of the respondents were identified based on the special codes given to them - the abbreviation 'S' for the subject, followed by a number that differentiates the individual namely S1, S2, S3, and so on.

Before the interview, the respondents were shown six political opinion articles written by three male columnists and three female columnists, with the gender of the writers kept anonymous. During the interview, the researcher handed out persuasive descriptors adopted from Dafouz's (2008) study (see appendix A). The descriptors were used to investigate the degree of persuasiveness of a text based on the 5 scales provided. After reading the articles, respondents were asked to select one article that was most reader-friendly, persuasive, and clear in terms of projecting the issue and ideas to the readers, based on the descriptors provided by the researcher. In addition, the respondents were asked to guess the gender of the columnists

at the end of the interview. The interviews were conducted online via Google Meet and recorded.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

First of all, the framework from Dafouz's (2003) classification of metadiscourse categories was used to analyse the metadiscourse markers in the political opinion articles selected for this study. This procedure requires the researcher to manually analyse the content of the opinion articles to identify and categorise the metadiscourse markers according to their category. Secondly, the researcher conducted a frequency analysis to determine the frequency of each metadiscourse used in the opinion articles as well as the most common category of metadiscourse employed by the writers in their opinion articles. In order to examine whether there is a similarity or/and difference in the metadiscourse markers used by male and female writers in the political opinion articles, the researchers performed comparative analysis. Besides, the researchers attempted to identify whether each gender uses a specific metadiscourse in their writing. The audio recorded during the short interview was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The metadiscourse markers found in the 100 opinion articles were categorized into 12 types according to Dafouz's (2003) classification of metadiscourse categories. Following the categorization, frequency analysis was conducted to record the frequency of markers used. The analysis was conducted as such to observe and record the number of occurrences of the metadiscourse markers in a single text of an opinion article.

Table 2: Metadiscourse markers count in both newspapers

Metadiscourse Markers	Name of Newspaper			
	New Straits Times (out of 36 articles)		The Star (out of 64 articles)	
		%		%
Logical	1303	49.75	2892	49.59
Sequences	160	6.11	259	4.44
Reminders	16	0.61	63	1.08
Topicalisers	22	0.84	65	1.11
Code glosses	37	1.41	125	2.14
Illocutionary Announcements	2	0.08	10	0.17
Hedges	7	0.27	17	0.29
Certainty	214	8.17	540	9.26
Attributors	187	7.14	355	6.09
Attitude	101	3.86	340	5.83
Commentaries	158	6.03	280	4.80
SUM of markers	412	15.73	886	15.19
	2619	100	5832	100

Table 2 shows that the columnist use 12 types of metadiscourse markers in their writing. The first seven markers belong to the textual metadiscourse markers category while the last five markers belong to the interpersonal metadiscourse markers category. For frequency analysis, the articles are grouped based on the newspaper to which they belonged.

The results revealed a wide range of textual metadiscourse markers occurrences (i.e., *Logical markers, Sequences, Reminders, Topicalisers, Code glosses, Illocutionary markers and Announcements*) in the opinion articles published in the New Straits Times, with a total of 1547 markers. From the total number of markers identified, the Logical marker was the most

frequently used marker. Out of 36 articles read and analysed from the New Straits Times, 1303 logical markers were inspected from the overall data. The second highest frequency of textual metadiscourse markers recorded for the New Straits Times opinion articles, with 160 markers used in the writing of 36 collected opinion articles collected was Sequences. Sequences markers such as *firstly*, *subsequently*, and *next*, signal a particular position in a text. The third marker that was frequently employed according to the opinion articles collected in New Straits Times is Code Glosses. Code glosses markers were identified 37 times in the writing of 36 collected opinion articles. This category is closely followed by Topicaliser markers which recorded an overall of 22 occurrences. The remaining categories (i.e., *Reminders*, *Illocutionary markers and Announcements*) displayed a low frequency of occurrence in the articles surveyed, with 16, 2, and 7 occurrences respectively. On the other hand, the results also showed a variety in the occurrences of interpersonal metadiscourse markers (i.e., *Hedges*, *Certainty markers*, *Attributors*, *Attitude markers* and *Commentaries*) in the opinion articles, with a total of 1072 markers, with Commentaries being the most frequently used. Commentaries accounted for 412 markers of the 36 opinion articles collected from the newspaper. Hedges had the second-highest frequency of interpersonal metadiscourse markers recorded for New Straits Times opinion articles, with 214 markers used in the writing of 36 collected opinion articles. With a total of 187 markers identified based on the data collected, Certainty marker was the third most frequently used markers by the columnists. The remaining categories (i.e., *Attitude markers* and *Attributors*), while not dissimilar to Certainty markers, have the fourth and the fifth-highest frequency of occurrence in the text analyzed.

The results deduced from the present study reveal that there was a variety in the occurrences of textual metadiscourse markers in the opinion articles, with a total number of 3431 markers. From the total number of markers identified, the most frequent markers used is Logical markers. Based on the result, there were 2892 occurrences of Logical markers in the written text out of the 64 opinion articles analyzed by the researcher. Sequences have the second-highest frequency of textual metadiscourse markers recorded from The Star opinion articles, with 259 markers used in the writing of 64 collected opinion articles. Code Glosses came in third place with a total of 125 markers identified. The remaining categories (i.e., *Reminders*, *Topicalisers*, *Illocutionary markers*, and *Announcements*) displayed a low frequency of occurrence in the articles surveyed, with occurrences not more than 100. Regarding interpersonal metadiscourse markers in The Star newspaper, there were a total of 2401 markers (i.e., *Hedges*, *Certainty markers*, *Attributors*, *Attitude markers* and *Commentaries*) identified. Based on the total number of markers, the most frequent marker

used is Commentaries. Commentaries accounted for 886 markers of the 64 opinion articles collected from the newspaper. The second-highest frequency of interpersonal metadiscourse markers recorded from The Star opinion articles is Hedges. Out of 2401 markers identified hedges made up of 540 markers used in the writing of 64 collected opinion articles. Certainty markers came in third place, with a frequency of 355 markers, followed by Attributors, with a frequency of 340 markers recorded. The last interpersonal metadiscourse markers with the lowest occurrence counted in the opinion articles of The Star newspaper was Attitude markers with a total of 280 markers out of the overall 2401 interpersonal metadiscourse markers.

4.1 Findings of the Similarities and Differences of Metadiscourse Markers Employed by Male and Female Columnists in Their Political Opinion Writing

The present study used comparative analysis to examine similarities or/and differences in the metadiscourse markers employed by male and female writers in their political opinion articles. Based on the articles collected from two Malaysian' English language newspapers, namely The New Straits Times and The Star, the researcher found that the number of female columnists is lower compared to their male counterparts. With male columnists dominating the political opinion article write-ups, the researcher decided to select a gender-balanced number of writers in this study. Therefore, the comparative analysis did not include all 100 articles. Out of 100 articles analyzed, only 56 articles were selected for the analysis, with 28 articles belonging to male columnists and the remaining 28 articles belonging to female columnists.

The results for all 56 articles which were selected for the analysis of gender-based metadiscourse markers are shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3: Textual metadiscourse categories

Categories	Male	Female	Total
Logical	1148	1209	2357
Sequences	136	134	270
Reminders	16	31	47
Topicalisers	25	21	46
Code glosses	42	42	84
Illocutionary	2	8	10
Announcements	11	6	17
Total	1380	1451	2831

The total number of textual metadiscourse markers collected from 56 opinion articles for analysis was 2831 markers. From the total markers, the male columnists account for 1380 markers, while the female columnists account for 1451 markers. Based on the seven types of textual metadiscourse markers, the Code Glosses marker showed a similar result for both genders. Out of all the identified textual metadiscourse markers, both genders were found to use 42 markers that represent Code Glosses in their opinion writing. Besides that, sequences recorded an almost similar number of usages among the columnists, with male columnists employing 136 markers and female columnists employing 134 markers. Another marker that showed this inclination is Topicalisers. Correspondingly, Topicalisers markers recorded only 4 markers that differed between genders, with male columnists using these markers 25 times in their writing compared to 21 occurrences of Topicalisers in female columnists' opinion articles.

On the other hand, several markers showed a significant difference in use between male and female columnists. From the data recorded, Logical markers showed a significant difference between both genders, with female columnists using this marker 61 times more than male columnists. Likewise, another textual marker that showed a significant difference in its use is Reminders. For this type of marker, female columnists were recorded to employ Reminders 31 times in their writing, while male columnists used them only 16 times.

The remaining textual marker types that recorded a difference between male and female columnists despite their lowest use were Announcements and Illocutionary markers. For Announcements markers, male columnists were recorded using them more frequently in their writing, with 11 markers, than female columnists, with only six markers. However, for Illocutionary markers, female columnists were recorded to employ eight markers in contrast to only two markers employed by male columnists.

Table 4: Interpersonal metadiscourse categories

Categories	Male	Female	Total
Hedges	221	192	413
Certainty	158	131	289
Attributors	97	154	251
Attitude	125	96	221
Commentaries	342	386	728
Total	943	959	1902

Table 4 shows the results for interpersonal metadiscourse markers in male and female columnists' political opinion articles. It can be seen that there is a clear comparison that can be deduced from the Table above. In the present study, the total number of interpersonal metadiscourse markers collected from 56 opinion articles for analysis was 1902 markers. From the total markers, male columnists account for 943 markers, while female columnists account for the remaining 959 markers.

Based on the five types of interpersonal metadiscourse markers, the closest number of markers used in comparison to male and female columnists is Hedges. Male columnists recorded 221 hedges used, whereas female columnists used 192 hedges, indicating a 21-point difference in the use of these markers, with male columnists being the most frequent users. Another marker that revealed a minor difference between columnists of both genders is Certainty markers. It was recorded that male columnist employed 158 total number of Certainty markers compared to 131 markers employed by female columnists. In addition, the Attitude markers employed by the columnists indicate a small difference of 29 markers. Again, male columnists were recorded to employ 125 Attitude markers, while their female counterparts were recorded to employ 96 markers.

On the contrary, the remaining markers, Commentaries and Attributors showed a significant difference in the number of times used by male and female columnists. The most significant difference in the number of markers employed between genders with a difference of 57 markers is Attributors. Female columnists were recorded to dominate the data with a total of 154 Attributor markers employed in their writing. Meanwhile, the male columnists were recorded to employ only 97 Attributors markers. Similarly, another interpersonal marker that showed a significant difference in the number of times used is Commentaries. Female columnists were recorded to employ 386 Commentaries markers in their writing, while only 342 markers were recorded in male columnists writing, a difference of 44 markers.

4.2 Findings of the Interview on How Male and Female Columnists' Styles of Writing and Their Distribution of Metadiscourse Markers Influence the Readers' Comprehension and Views of the Text

The researchers conducted a short interview with eight respondents to investigate the implication of using metadiscourse markers in the writing of opinion articles, as well as whether gender plays a role in the respondents' decision to select a most reader-friendly and persuasive opinion article. The opinion articles chosen for the interview were taken from six different columnists; three male columnists and three female columnists from both of the

newspaper opinion articles selected. These 6 articles were chosen because they have the most variety of metadiscourse markers in the text. The summary of metadiscourse markers associated with each article is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Metadiscourse in 6 opinion articles

Article No.	Title of Opinion Articles	Metadiscourse Markers		
		Textual	Interpersonal	Total
A (1)	In Unity We Find Strength Malaysian in the Eyes of the	60	39	99
A (2)	Worlds Depoliticizing the System Here in	30	39	69
A (3)	Malaysia	78	45	123
A (4)	Let's Stop the Hatewave	67	78	145
A (5)	New Malaysia Old Politics	86	44	130
A (6)	Wising Up to A Whale of a Tale	72	68	140

During the interview, most of the respondents agreed that opinion articles A(3), A(4), and A(6) appealed to the readers the most and appeared to be the most persuasive to the readers. These articles were chosen over others because the articles presented to them not only provide clear examples but the writers' use of personal pronouns as well as markers associated with commentaries such as the direct address to the reader helps to establish rapport and engage readers with the writers. For example, S8 said:

“As for me what interests me the most of these 6 articles is the article titled ‘Let’s stop the hatewave’(A4). The article appears interesting to me because it talks about human rights and the LGBT movement in Malaysia. I believed that the writer of this article is an activist fighting for the rights of those people. The sentences used in this article are simple and direct and these articles look persuasive to me since they have employed many metadiscourse markers. The writer also used his knowledge about people facing discrimination by just being different to good use, and I must say that the writer has managed to persuade me.”

Based on the 6 opinion articles chosen for this interview, A(4) had the highest number of metadiscourse markers in the text following by A(6). Previous research has found that the number of metadiscourse markers in a text is one of the factors contributing to the text's

readability and persuasiveness of the text. For instance, Crismore and Farnsworth (1990) and Hyland (2005) stated that metadiscourse is an important component of persuasive and argumentative discourse, and people make decisions about how to use language techniques to interact with others across genres and disciplines. Virtanen et al. (2005) confirmed that newspaper editors used hedges and boosters to persuade readers of survey conclusions. Hence, the findings in this study showed that opinion articles with the highest numbers of metadiscourse markers in the text affected the readers' view because they found them to be more persuasive. One of the reasons is the easy-to-follow presentation of arguments which is easy to keep up and the use of interpersonal markers that establish the writer-relationships.

Of the 3 articles selected, two of the articles belong to female columnists are A(4) "Let's stop the hatewave" and A(6) "Wising Up to A Whale of a Tale", and one article (A3) "Depoliticizing the System Here in Malaysia" written by a male columnist which also found to use several metadiscourse markers in his writing. Article A(4) and A(6) were found to have a high number of commentaries markers which are known to establish rapport between writers-readers. Obviously, female writers are good in using commentaries in their writing to make the readers feel included and have a voice of their own. The writers are aware of the readers' presence and by using commentaries, they intend to persuade readers gradually and not to sound aggressive. From this finding, female writers can be described as writers who are concerned of their readers and work to establish connection with them through the use of devices such as shown in the following examples which are taken from A(4)-"Let's stop the "hatewave" opinion article from The Star, August 2018;

Example 1: "...The photographs of her wounds should horrify any decent person. Apparently, those men set upon her for the simple reason that they didn't like transgender people. Now why would they suddenly get that idea?" [Rhetorical question]

Example 2: "Hopefully, you're not the sort of person who can sleep well knowing what you've just said has, at minimum, caused hurt or in the worst of cases, caused that person to be killed." [Direct address to readers]

Example 3: "It makes me wonder about the mental health of these commenters, given the amount of time..." [Personalization]

Each of the markers highlighted above belongs to the category of commentaries, and as can be seen, the columnists employed these markers to engage with the readers by asking questions

and involving both the reader, as well as the columnist, in the issue. Also, by doing this, it feels as if the interaction happened in two ways; not just biasness to the columnist's own thoughts and writing, but also as an attempt to put the readers in the argument as actively involved in the issue being discussed.

At the end of the interview, when the respondents were asked to guess the gender of the columnists for the 3 articles mentioned above, six (S1, S2, S5, S6, S7, and S8) out of 8 the respondents guessed that A(4) and A(6) were written by a male writer. For instance, S5 said: "I think this (Let's stop the hatewave) is written by a male columnist as I don't see any flowery sentences." For those (S1, S2, S5, S7, and S8) who believed that all the 3 articles were written by male columnists, they have the perception that females are generally less interested in politics than males. On the other hand, 2 respondents (S3 and S4) believed that A(4) and A(6) were written by a female columnist. According to them, the words in these two articles were strong and emotional, similar to a female's style of writing. For A(3), it was 100% correctly identified as written by a male columnist because the style of writing tends to be more direct.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Based on the present study, the presence of metadiscourse markers, both textual and interpersonal metadiscourse markers in the selected opinion articles supported Dafouz's (2008) idea concerning the essential role of this element in the construction of persuasion in the genre of newspaper opinion articles. According to the framework employed in the study, the metadiscourse markers are divided into two categories namely textual and interpersonal metadiscourse markers. There are 7 types of metadiscourse markers under the textual metadiscourse category, namely Logical markers, Sequences, Reminders, Topicalisers, Code Glosses, Illocutionary markers and Announcement. Meanwhile, there are 5 types of interpersonal metadiscourse markers including Hedges, Certainty markers, Attributors, Attitude markers and Commentaries. The result of the study revealed that Logical markers were found to be the most popular metadiscourse marker employed by columnists in the writing of their political opinion articles under the topic of the general election. Logical markers that belong to the textual category of metadiscourse markers are an essential characteristic of a text in opinion articles because of their function to express a semantic relationship between discourse stretches. In other words, Logical markers help readers in interpreting pragmatic connections with the use of additives (in addition/furthermore), adversative (or/but), consecutive (so/therefore) and conclusive relationships (finally/sum) in the written text.

Conversely, Commentaries stood out as the most frequently used metadiscourse markers in the interpersonal metadiscourse markers category. The same finding was recorded in *The Star* and *New Straits Times* newspapers sections of opinion articles. The use of commentaries indicate that columnists are aware of the readers' presence and hence, they put on their readers' perspective in the text. Moreover, the use of Commentaries throughout the text help to build reader-writer rapport with the use of rhetorical questions (is this what we expected?), direct appeals (dear readers), personalizations (I, me, my) and asides; the use of parentheses or other symbols which help in engaging the readers and writers.

Findings from the compare and contrast analysis found that female columnists were recorded to employ generally more textual metadiscourse markers compared to male columnists. The textual category of metadiscourse markers refers to devices or markers which help to form a coherent text by relating individual propositions to each other and other texts (Fuentes-Olivera et al., 2001). This is consistent with the previous findings (Shen, 2010; Mäki et al., 2001) in literature that females usually create a more cohesive text than males. The findings of this study showed that female columnists are concerned about their text readability by ensuring that the ideas are formed coherently with the use of metadiscourse markers.

Regarding interpersonal metadiscourse markers, generally, the data showed that there is no significant difference between the total number of markers employed by both genders. Both male and female columnists employed an almost similar number of markers, with none being more significant than the others. This means that writers are aware of the importance of using interpersonal markers in their writing as well as to attain persuasion.

The analysis of the data indicated that the most common marker used by both genders is Hedges. This finding was supported by the findings of numerous studies (Dafouz, 2003, 2008; Hyland, 1998) which demonstrated that Hedges holds a predominant position among different interpersonal metadiscourse categories. Besides that, Hedges can show the degree of tentativeness, possibilities, or politeness that the writer intends to reflect in his or her writing (Noorian & Biria, 2010).

In addition, the interview with readers found that the article "Let's stop the "hatewave"" with a high number of metadiscourse markers is the most persuasive of the 6 selected opinion articles. The use of metadiscourse has often been regarded as the writer's attempt to achieve persuasiveness through making rational (logos), credible (ethos), and affective (pathos) appeals to the readers (Ho, 2016). Therefore it can be concluded that based on this study, female columnists who employed a greater number of metadiscourse markers in their text writing are more persuasive compared to their male counterparts. As observed by all responses in the

interview, female columnists are expected to have a better reputation in terms of their language use compared to male writers. The responses provided by the respondents supported Lakoff's (1973) early work in which she claimed that although males are considered to be better at language, females are better language users in describing things, using more adjectives and adverbs. This is what the respondents intended to explain. On the other hand, the findings of the blind test showed that the majority perceived the opinion articles with a higher degree of persuasiveness as written by male columnists because they generally believed that males exhibited higher levels of political knowledge than females.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In Malaysia, although females are under-represented in political institutions, their political interest and knowledge can be seen in media. Any discussion on the role of females in politics should not be confined to only representation in formal institutions (Wan Azizah, 2002). The present study has revealed that female columnists not only display their interest and knowledge in politics, but they also present influential opinion articles with substantive analysis of a topic in the political context. The way in which female writers explained and analysed political issues had a strong persuasion effect on their readers. By using the appropriate metadiscourse markers in their writing, female writers are able to evoke the readers' emotions, which in turn helped to build a strong writer-reader relationship.

From the findings, two of the three most persuasive opinion articles were written by female columnists, reflecting that female exhibit political knowledge, analytical thinking, and rationality in the same way that males do in the political context. This study suggests that women have successfully proven their abilities, and it is now time for the patriarchal political world to acknowledge, respect, and honour their feminine attributes, ideals, and values.

Given the impact of gender differences on political opinion writing, more research is needed to address the use of different linguistic devices in written discourses with a focus on gender differences. In addition, further studies focusing on female's political spoken discourses on various social media platforms is also necessary in the future in order to raise awareness about females' political interests, knowledge and participation at different levels and in different ways.

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APPENDIX

DESCRIPTORS FOR ARTICLE PERSUASIVENESS

Adopted from Dafouz's (2008)

Questions to ask:

- 1) Read each of the 6 texts selected.
- 2) After reading them, rank the texts from 1 to 5 (5 = highest score and 1 = the lowest) according to the degree of persuasion that, in your opinion, the texts present. Please check the descriptors included below as reference model.
- 3) Explain the reasons for your decision.

Descriptors:

5 = The text is highly persuasive. The argumentation is very well-presented, the text is very well-structured and the author uses plenty of examples, facts and figures, to endorse the ideas presented (i.e., rational appeals). The author uses his/her personal experience and subject knowledge very appropriately to convince the audience (i.e., credibility appeals) and includes vivid language and emotional strategies (direct address to the reader, inclusive pronouns. . .) in a very effective manner to evoke sentiment in the readership (i.e., affective strategies).

4 = The text is very persuasive. The argumentation is well-presented and well-structured. The author uses some examples, facts and figures, to endorse the ideas presented (i.e., rational appeals). The author uses his/her personal experience and subject knowledge to convince the audience (i.e., credibility appeals) and includes vivid language and emotional strategies (direct address to the reader, inclusive pronouns. . .) to evoke sentiment in the readership (i.e., affective strategies).

3 = The text is fairly persuasive. The argumentation is rather loose, the text is loosely structured and the author uses very scarce examples, facts and figures, to endorse the ideas presented (i.e., rational appeals). The author uses his/her personal experience and subject knowledge in a limited way to convince the audience (i.e. credibility appeals) and includes few effective samples of vivid language and emotional strategies (direct address to the reader, inclusive pronouns. . .) to evoke sentiment in the readership (i.e. affective strategies).

2 = The text is more or less persuasive. The argumentation is not well-presented, the text is not well-structured and the author does not use examples, nor facts or figures to endorse the ideas presented (i.e., rational appeals). The author does not use adequately his/her personal experience and subject knowledge to convince the audience (i.e., credibility appeals) and fails to include vivid language and emotional strategies (direct address to the reader, inclusive pronouns) to evoke sentiment in the readership (i.e., affective strategies).

1 = The text is not persuasive. There is no argumentation in the text, no structuring of the text and the author does not use examples, nor facts or figures to endorse the ideas presented (i.e., rational appeals). The author does not use his/her personal experience and subject knowledge to convince the audience (i.e., credibility appeals) and fails to include (or uses inappropriately) vivid language and emotional strategies (direct address to the reader, inclusive pronouns. . .) to evoke sentiment in the readership (i.e., affective strategies)