

## An Appraisal System Used in CNN Headline News Coverage of Sean Diddy Comb's Case: A Discourse Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of evaluative language in CNN International's headlines reporting on the legal case of American rapper Sean 'Diddy' Combs through the dual theoretical lenses of Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal System and Van Dijk's theory of ideological discourse. Applying a qualitative descriptive method and discourse analysis approach, we analyzed 31 headlines published from September to December 2024 using the Attitude subsystem's three categories: Judgment, Appreciation, and Affect. The findings reveal a striking dominance of Judgment (88%), particularly within the Social Sanction domain, demonstrating CNN's systematic framing of Combs through legal and moral evaluations. Appreciation (8%) and Affect (4%) appear minimally, relegated to passing references to cultural influence or emotionally charged victim quotes. This evaluative pattern aligns with Van Dijk's concept of ideological bias in media discourse, showing how CNN's linguistic choices construct a criminalized image of Combs before legal resolution. The analysis demonstrates how 88% Judgment-based language, predominantly negative, reinforces dominant moral discourses while marginalizing Combs' cultural contributions (Appreciation) and emotional complexity (Affect). These findings illuminate the media's power to shape public perception through strategic linguistic framing, highlighting the need for critical engagement with news discourse, particularly in high-profile cases where media narratives may precede judicial outcomes.

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### INTRODUCTION

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception, particularly in high-profile cases involving celebrities. Sean Diddy Combs, a renowned American rapper, became the center of widespread media attention in 2024 following multiple lawsuits alleging sexual harassment and human trafficking in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas (Levenson, 2024). Media coverage of these incidents often influences public opinion, as news outlets frame narratives that can either reinforce or challenge prevailing attitudes (Hanych, 2023). CNN International, a leading global news network, has been instrumental in disseminating updates on Combs' case, leveraging its reputation for timely and credible reporting (CNN International, 2025). This study examines how CNN International employs linguistic strategies to construct its coverage, offering insights into the interplay between media representation and public perception.

Discourse analysis, particularly the *Appraisal System* framework by Martin and White (2005) provides a robust tool for dissecting media language. The *Appraisal System*, comprising Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, enables researchers to analyse how evaluative language shapes audience interpretations (Martin and White, 2005). While prior studies have applied this framework to compare news across cultures Dai and Pan, (2024) few have focused on celebrity scandals or the specific role of CNN International. This research fills that gap by investigating how CNN's coverage of Sean Diddy Combs' case employs evaluative language to influence global audiences. By concentrating on the Attitude aspect, the study reveals how emotional and ethical assessments in news texts contribute to framing public figures.

The primary problem addressed in this study is identifying the dominant type of *Appraisal System* in CNN International's reporting on Sean Diddy Combs and interpreting its role in constructing media narratives. Understanding these linguistic patterns is critical, as they underscore the media's power to sway public opinion, particularly in controversial cases involving celebrities. The objectives are to determine the predominant *Appraisal System* type in CNN's coverage. These aims align with broader scholarly efforts to decode media bias and its societal implications.

Headlines serve as the primary point of contact between news outlets and audiences, often carrying significant ideological weight due to their concise and evaluative nature (Van Dijk, 2015). Unlike full news articles, headlines must capture attention and convey tone within a limited word count, making them potent tools for framing narratives (Wu, 2024). By focusing on headlines, this study highlights how CNN International's linguistic choices in these critical snippets reinforce moral and legal judgments, thereby shaping public discourse even before the full story is consumed. This approach underscores the urgency of scrutinizing headlines as discrete units of media discourse, particularly in high-stakes cases like Combs', where public opinion is rapidly formed and difficult to reverse.

This research holds theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it advances discourse analysis by applying the *Appraisal System* to understudied terrain celebrity scandals in international media. Practically, it enhances media literacy by equipping audiences with tools to critically evaluate news framing (Fairclough, 1995). For academics, the study serves as a reference for analyzing media discourse, while journalists and readers alike can benefit from its insights into language-driven persuasion. By exposing the mechanisms of news framing, the study encourages a more discerning engagement with media narratives.

The study focuses on CNN International's coverage of Sean Diddy Combs' case from 17 September to 11 December 2024, utilizing Martin and White (2005)'s *Appraisal System* to analyze Attitude in news texts. CNN's global reach and focus on U.S. news make it an ideal case for examining how international media frames domestic celebrity scandals (Stelter, 2020). Key terms such as *discourse analysis*, *Appraisal System*, and *CNN* are operationalized to guide the investigation. Through this lens, the research illuminates the nuanced ways media language influences public judgment, contributing to ongoing discussions about media ethics and accountability.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Appraisal System, developed by Martin and White (2005), is a key framework within Systemic Functional Linguistics used to explore how language expresses evaluation, stance, and alignment. It consists of three subsystems: *Attitude*, *Engagement*, and *Graduation*, with *Attitude* further divided into *Judgment*, *Affect*, and *Appreciation*. This system has been widely used to investigate how media constructs ideological meanings and influences public perception through evaluative language.

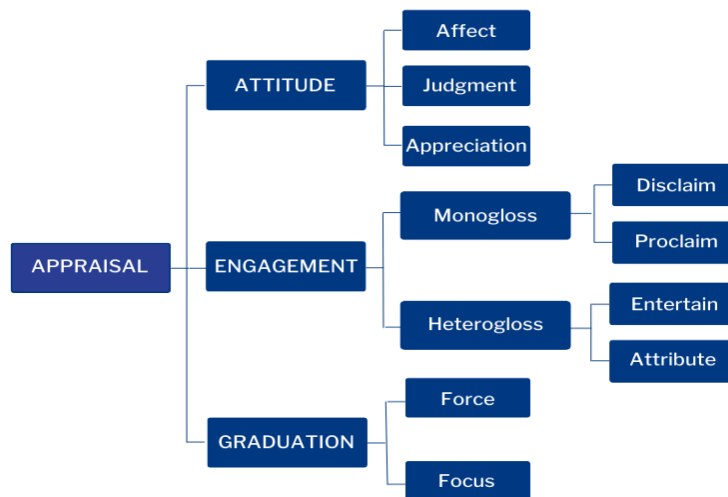


Figure 1. An Overview of Appraisal Resource (Martin and White, 2005)

Previous studies demonstrate the utility of the Appraisal framework in various media contexts. For instance, Dai and Pan, (2024) compared Chinese and American media representations of the *Roe v. Wade* issue, revealing how ideological biases are embedded in news discourse through the strategic use of attitude resources. Similarly, Yulianti et al. (2021) analysed vaccine-related news in Indonesian media and identified a strong emphasis on *Judgment* to shape public perceptions regarding health decisions. Almayouf, (2021) also employed the Appraisal System to examine how evaluative language was used to frame the Trump administration’s travel ban, emphasizing the moral and legal implications constructed through linguistic choices.

More recent applications extend to high-profile legal and conflict reporting. Risdianto et al., (2024) examined evaluative stances in the Indonesian media’s portrayal of the Ferdy Sambo murder case, identifying moral positioning as a dominant narrative tool. Yaquti (2024) studied BBC’s coverage of the Israel–Hamas conflict, finding that *Judgment* played a key role in reinforcing international stances on justice and victimhood. Additionally, Sutrisno et al. (2025) moved beyond news texts by analysing evaluative meaning in song lyrics, illustrating the system’s flexibility across genres.

Despite these contributions, few studies have explored how international media deploys evaluative strategies in celebrity-related scandals, particularly involving high-profile figures like Sean Diddy Combs. The use of the Appraisal System in this study builds upon but also extends prior research by applying the framework to a new and culturally significant context. While most previous works centre on political or health discourse, the present research interrogates the intersection of media representation and the morality area still underrepresented in the literature.

This study also integrates the theoretical perspectives of Fairclough’s (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis and Van Dijk’s (1988) framing theory to examine the ideological functions of evaluative language. Both frameworks underscore how media constructs social realities and power structures through discourse. By synthesising these theoretical lenses, this research positions the Appraisal System not only as a linguistic tool but as a critical framework to uncover how CNN International’s coverage of Combs’ legal issues contributes to the moral framing of celebrity identity in global news media.

In sum, existing literature provides a strong foundation for understanding evaluative strategies in news reporting. However, this study advances the field by applying that foundation to a novel domain: celebrity scandal discourse in international media. It addresses a significant gap by illustrating how the language of appraisal shapes public understanding of reputation, guilt, and character in cases involving globally recognised figures. This nuanced exploration enriches ongoing scholarly conversations on media framing, discourse, and representation

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze how language is used in CNN International's news headlines to portray the legal case of Sean Diddy Combs. A qualitative descriptive approach is particularly suitable when the aim is to provide a comprehensive summary of an event or phenomenon in everyday terms, focusing on the *who, what, and where* of experiences (Creswell, 2018). The research specifically applies Martin and White (2005) *Appraisal System* to examine evaluative attitudes, namely, *Judgment, Appreciation, and Affect*, embedded in the linguistic elements of 31 selected headlines. These headlines were collected during a defined time frame, from September 17, 2024, to December 11, 2024, to ensure temporal consistency and analytical focus.

The primary data in this study consists of news headlines published by CNN International, selected directly without the use of intermediaries (Kumar, 2011). To ensure methodological rigor, specific selection criteria were applied. Headlines were included if they contained explicit references to Combs and addressed legal developments or public reactions to his case. Redundancy was minimized by excluding near-identical reports of the same event, retaining only the earliest published version, and omitting purely factual updates devoid of evaluative language routine court date announcements. This process yielded a focused corpus that balanced breadth and depth while maintaining analytical relevance.

Data collection was carried out using a screenshot method, followed by classification and interpretation of language use. The researcher identified evaluative expressions and mapped them according to the Appraisal framework. This process enabled the researcher to understand not only the lexical choices but also the underlying ideological framing applied by the media outlet.

For data analysis, the study adapted Miles & Huberman (2014) three-stage qualitative model. During the data condensation phase, researchers manually coded each headline using Martin and White (2005) Attitude framework, categorizing evaluative language into three types: Judgment (moral/legal evaluations like "*denied bail*"), Appreciation (cultural valuations such as "*famous musician*"), and Affect (emotional expressions including "*felt powerless*"). To enhance reliability, a second researcher independently reviewed the coding, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. This iterative process ensured consistent application of the Appraisal System categories across all headlines.

The condensed data were then systematically displayed through frequency tabulation, revealing striking patterns in CNN's framing strategies. This quantitative visualization served as the foundation for deeper qualitative interpretation. In the final verification stage, findings were contextualized using Van Dijk (2015) discourse analysis and Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse framework. For instance, the prevalence of Judgment terms like "*racketeering*" was examined not merely as lexical choices but as ideological tools that construct Combs as a moral transgressor before legal adjudication. This multilayered approach combined systematic coding with theoretical interpretation to uncover how evaluative language in headlines functions as a mechanism of media framing.

In the final phase, conclusion drawing and verification, the results were interpreted within the context of media discourse theory. The findings suggest that CNN's headlines predominantly deploy evaluative language that frames Sean Diddy Combs in a morally charged manner. This supports the argument that media outlets use language strategically to influence public perception and establish narrative authority.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyses 31 CNN headlines related to Sean 'Diddy' Combs between September and December 2024. By applying Martin and White (2005) *Appraisal System* focusing on *Attitude* (Judgment, Appreciation, and Affect), the study reveals that CNN's news discourse predominantly utilised evaluative language to frame Combs' public image. The data shows a dominant use of *Judgment* (88%), particularly within the *Social Sanction* subcategory, portraying

Combs as a legal and moral transgressor. *Appreciation* (8%) and *Affect* (4%) appear minimally, often relegated to passing references or victim-centric quotes. Below is a summary of the findings:

**Table 1. Appraisal System Aspect of Attitude on Sean Diddy Combs Headline News**

No.	Appraisal Aspect of Attitude	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Judgment	66	88%
2.	Appreciation	6	8%
3.	Affect	3	4%
<b>Total</b>		<b>75</b>	<b>100%</b>

The dominance of *Judgment* underscores CNN’s focus on legal and moral evaluations, while the scarcity of *Appreciation* and *Affect* suggests a prioritization of scandal over nuanced emotional or cultural framing.

### Judgment: Legal and Moral Evaluation

Judgment assesses human behaviour based on social norms. In this case, it is largely negative, subdivided into Social Sanction (veracity and propriety) and Social Esteem.

**Table 2. Judgment–Social Sanction**

No.	Social Sanction	Positive	Negative
1.	Veracity (truth)	-	Alleged co-conspirators, accuses, intensifying allegations, pursue new allegations, allegations against him, allege, other celebrities allegedly involved, denies allegations
2.	Propriety (ethnics)	-	Racketeering conspiracy, sex trafficking, indictment, denied bail, remain in federal, remain in custody, judged denies bail appeal, federal investigation, criminal case, drugging and assaulting, filming it, arrested, appeal detention, seeking release, accused drugging, sexually assaulting, 100 men and women, federal criminal sex trafficking case, leaked evidence, impeding ‘fair trial’, arrested, racketeering, sex trafficking case, accused sexual assault, six new lawsuits, alleged teenage victim, civil suits mounting, could be bad, named in 7 new lawsuits, accused sexual assaulting, ‘making the band’ teen contestant, 10 year-old boy, cannot be proceed under a pseudonym, corruptly influence, taint the jury pool, accusers, extortion lawsuit, can’t use notes, seized during jail cell raid, faces five new lawsuits, denied bail, accused, dangling woman off balcony, new lawsuit, sexually assaulted a 13-year-old, sexual

CNN headlines are rich in lexicon reinforcing criminality, “*racketeering conspiracy*,” “*sex trafficking*,” and “*denied bail*”, which construct an image of Combs as a morally and legally deviant actor.

**Table 3. Judgment–Social Esteem**

No.	Social Esteem	Positive	Negative
1.	Normality	-	-
2.	Capacity	-	-
3.	Tenacity	Want to testify, speaks out for the first time	Preparing for his case

Social Esteem judgments are rare. The few positive mentions of tenacity reflect Combs’ active defence preparation, although these do not counterbalance the overwhelming negative sanctioning.

### Appreciation: Evaluating Cultural Impact

Appreciation concerns the evaluation of objects, phenomena, or cultural products.

**Table 4. Types of Appreciation**

No.	Appreciation	Positive	Negative
1.	Reaction	Lavish (impact), visiting (quality)	-
2.	Composition	-	-
3.	Valuation	Famous musician, peak, cultural influence	-

Despite the scandal-driven tone, CNN briefly acknowledged Combs’ artistic contributions. However, such mentions are minimal, buried beneath dominant judgment-oriented framing.

### Affect: Emotional Resonance and Victim Framing

Affect captures emotional expressions. It appears sparingly, mainly within quotes from victims or family members.

**Table 5. Types of Affect**

No.	Affect	Positive	Negative
1.	Un/happiness		Devastated, Profoundly saddened
2.	In/security		‘felt powerless’

CNN’s rare use of affective language suggests a careful attempt to maintain neutrality, except when quoting victims or family members. These quotes evoke sympathy and reinforce the emotional weight of the allegations.

This section elaborates on how evaluative language in CNN International’s headlines about Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs constructs public perception. The discussion is based on the Attitude subsystem of Martin and White P, (2005) Appraisal Theory, comprising *Judgment*, *Appreciation*, and *Affect* and is contextualised within Van Dijk (1995) media discourse framing theory. The prominence of Judgment (88%) indicates a narrative that frames Combs primarily as a violator of legal and moral norms. This section unpacks each attitude dimension in greater detail.

### Judgment as the Dominant Evaluative Strategy

Judgment, particularly Social Sanction (veracity and propriety), overwhelmingly dominates the headlines. This demonstrates that CNN prioritises moral and legal evaluations when reporting on the Combs case. Headlines such as “*Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs accused of sexually assaulting a woman in a new civil lawsuit*” and “*Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs denied bail for a third time*” utilise a lexicon with heavy legal implications. Terms like “*accused*”, “*denied*”, “*sex trafficking*”, and “*racketeering*” are not merely factual but function evaluatively to depict Combs as a morally deviant figure.

This aligns with Van Dijk (1995) theory of ideological discourse, where language choices in media are not neutral but serve to reproduce social evaluations and bias. The repetition of negative judgments without substantial inclusion of neutral or mitigating perspectives suggests a *trial-by-media* dynamic that prioritises scandal over balanced reporting. It also reflects Van Dijk's concept of *semantic macrostructures*, where the dominant thematic frame (Combs as a criminal) overshadows counter-narratives.

Moreover, within the Judgment category, *Social Esteem* appears minimally and primarily through expressions of tenacity (e.g., "want to testify"). These rare instances humanise Combs slightly but are insufficient to counteract the prevailing negative frame. This imbalance shows how media selectively invoke social values, justice, morality, and trust mainly to critique rather than to contextualise or nuance the subject.

### **Appreciation and the Marginalisation of Cultural Legacy**

The minimal presence of Appreciation (8%) in CNN's coverage reveals a systematic marginalisation of Sean Diddy Combs' cultural contributions. While terms like "*famous musician*" or "*cultural influence*" briefly acknowledge his artistic legacy, their scarcity suggests a deliberate editorial choice to prioritise scandal over context. This omission aligns with Entman (1993) framing theory, where selective exclusion functions as powerfully as inclusion in shaping narratives. The near-absence of positive valuation in Appreciation, particularly in categories like Composition (0%) that might highlight artistic merit, constructs Combs as a one-dimensional legal subject rather than a complex public figure. This framing resonates with Yu & Ni, (2020) findings in celebrity scandal coverage, where media outlets systematically suppress positive attributes to amplify moral condemnation. Crucially, this imbalance denies audiences the contextual information needed to form balanced judgments, potentially violating journalistic principles of fairness Hanych (2023). The strategic backgrounding of Appreciation thus functions as an ideological tool, reinforcing what Van Dijk (2015) terms "*moral simplification*" in high-profile cases.

### **Affect and Emotional Framing Through Victim-Centric Narrative**

Affect, the least frequent attitude type (4%), appears only in emotionally charged quotes, typically from victims or close family. For example, the headline "*Diddy accuser speaks out: 'I felt powerless'*" uses Affect to evoke sympathy and highlight the psychological toll of the alleged abuse. Another example is "*Sean Combs' mother says she's 'devastated and profoundly saddened'*", which offers a glimpse into the emotional consequences within his circle.

This binary aligns perfectly with Van Dijk (1988) ideological square, where media "positivize" victims while "negativizing" the accused. Such framing goes beyond mere reporting; it engineers reader empathy through what Fairclough (1995) identifies as synthetic personalization, where quoted emotional snippets create illusory intimacy with victims. The complete absence of Affect terms describing Combs' emotional state fear, remorse is particularly telling. As Martin and White (2005) note, Affect humanizes subjects, and its selective application here dehumanizes the accused while sanctifying victims. This lopsided emotional framing may predispose public opinion before trial, exemplifying what Hanych (2023) warns as media's "prejudicial emotional priming." The restraint in using Affect thus isn't neutrality but rather a strategic amplification of certain emotions to cement moral positioning.

### **Framing Implications and Media Bias**

The findings demonstrate how negative lexicalization Van Dijk (2015) operates through commercial and ideological mechanisms. The repetitive Judgment terms (88%) create a semantic macrostructure associating Combs with guilt, while the Appreciation/Affect imbalance constructs a one-dimensional criminal identity.

This framing reflects profit-driven media logic - scandals generate clicks Stelter (2020),

and moral outrage serves as a marketable commodity. It also reveals power dynamics: as Fairclough's (1995) notes, media reinforce societal hierarchies by policing morality through selective framing.

Crucially, CNN's "neutrality" is revealed as strategic rather than substantive. The systematic exclusion of balancing frames (cultural contributions, defendant's emotions) demonstrates how omission functions as powerfully as explicit language in shaping ideological narratives. This has profound implications for media ethics, particularly in cases where pretrial publicity may prejudice legal outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that CNN International's headlines on the Sean 'Diddy' Combs case are predominantly constructed through evaluative language rooted in the Appraisal System, specifically in the domain of Attitude. The overwhelming presence of Judgment (88%), particularly within the Social Sanction subcategory, reveals a media strategy focused on assessing the moral and legal implications of Combs' alleged actions. This pattern aligns with Van Dijk, (2015) theory of ideological discourse, illustrating how language operates not merely as a medium of information but as a tool for moral positioning and pre-trial framing.

While Appreciation (8%) and Affect (4%) appear sporadically, their marginalization in CNN's coverage suggests a deliberate discursive preference for scandal-oriented narratives over balanced representation. The near-absence of positive cultural valuation Appreciation and the exclusive restriction of Affect to victim perspectives create what might be termed a "rhetoric of absence" where strategic omissions prove as ideologically potent as explicit condemnations. This aligns with Entman, (1993) observation that framing occurs as much through exclusion as inclusion, particularly in high-profile legal cases where media narratives risk outpacing judicial processes.

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the exclusive focus on headlines, while revealing, cannot capture the full complexity of CNN's framing across entire articles. Second, the study's temporal scope (September-December 2024) may not reflect longitudinal shifts in media tone as legal proceedings evolve. Third, the analysis of a single news outlet limits comparative insights into how different media organizations might frame the same case differently.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the corpus to include full news articles, incorporating comparative analysis across multiple media outlets, and tracking evaluative patterns throughout the entire legal process. Additionally, experimental studies could investigate how these linguistic patterns actually influence audience perceptions and attitudes. Such extensions would further illuminate the complex interplay between media discourse, public opinion, and legal outcomes in celebrity scandals.

Ultimately, this study contributes to both theoretical and practical discussions about media ethics. Theoretically, it advances discourse analysis by applying the Appraisal System to the understudied domain of international celebrity scandal coverage. Practically, it underscores the need for media literacy initiatives that equip audiences to critically evaluate the ideological implications of news framing, particularly in legally unresolved cases where language may effectively predetermine public judgment.

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