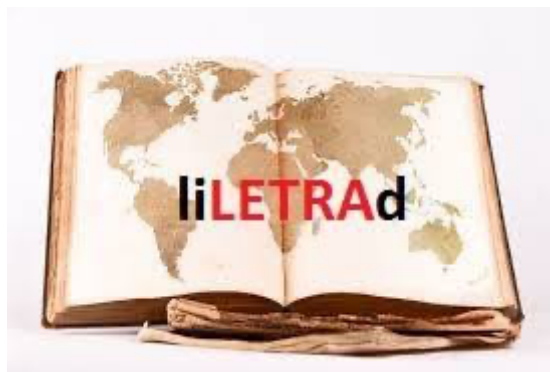


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“Race Relations in America Are Better Than Ever”: A Critical Discourse Analysis of *The Wall Street Journal*’s delegitimization of Black Lives Matter

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Abstract: This article draws on Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Appraisal Theory so as to explore patterns of representation associated to the Black Lives Matter movement in an *ad hoc* corpus compiling articles from *The Wall Street Journal*, published between 2020 and 2021. *The Wall Street Journal* is a well-respected American, English-language, daily newspaper based in New York City, whose primary focus is economics and business. One of the largest newspapers in the country considering circulation, the WSJ is perceived by the population as a trustworthy source of information, which, according to the Media Bias Chart, skews right. In this article, I conduct a corpus-based critical discourse analysis to address the following research questions: 1. Is the representation of BLM in the WSJ, a business-focused newspaper, enacted in terms of mere objective economic/financial interest? 2. What kind of discursive strategies are employed to delegitimize and criminalize BLM? 3. What does the WSJ’s discursive construction of BLM reveal about the Journal’s mindset and how is this narrative related to social inequality? Using Sketch Engine as a basis for a quantitative and qualitative investigation, I unveil the discursive and semiotic strategies employed to criminalize this social movement.

Keywords: corpus-assisted discourse studies, critical discourse analysis; appraisal theory; corpus linguistics, Sketch Engine

Resumen: Este artículo se fundamenta en la metodología de los estudios del discurso asistidos por Corpus, el análisis crítico del discurso y la teoría de la valoración para explorar los patrones de representación asociados al movimiento Black Lives Matter en un corpus *ad hoc* que recopila artículos de *The Wall Street Journal*, publicados entre 2020 y 2021. *The Wall Street Journal* es un respetado diario estadounidense en lengua inglesa con sede en la ciudad de Nueva York, dedicado principalmente a la economía y los negocios. Es uno de los mayores periódicos del país en cuanto a difusión y es percibido por la población como una fuente de información fiable que, según el Media Bias Chart, se inclina hacia la derecha. En este artículo, realizo un análisis crítico del discurso basado en corpus para abordar las siguientes preguntas de investigación: 1. ¿La representación de BLM en el WSJ, un periódico centrado en los negocios, se hace en términos de mero interés económico/financiero objetivo? 2. ¿Qué tipo de estrategias discursivas se emplean para deslegitimar y criminalizar a BLM? 3. ¿Qué revela la construcción discursiva de BLM por parte del WSJ sobre la inclinación ideológica del periódico y cómo se relaciona esta narrativa con la desigualdad social? Utilizando Sketch Engine como base para una investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa, desvelo las estrategias discursivas y semióticas empleadas para criminalizar este movimiento social.

Palabras clave: análisis crítico del discurso, teoría de la valoración, lingüística de corpus; Sketch Engine.

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1. Introduction

This article draws on Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (Partington *et al.*, 2013), Critical Discourse Analysis and Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) so as to explore patterns of representation associated to the Black Lives Matter movement (hereafter BLM) in an *ad hoc* corpus compiling articles from *The Wall Street Journal* (hereafter WSJ), published between 2020 and 2021. *The Journal* is a well-respected American, English-language, daily newspaper based in New York City, whose primary focus is economics and business. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2021), it is one of the largest newspapers in the United States considering circulation, its daily print readership standing at over 700 thousand copies, whereas digital circulation reaches 2.7 million. Following the NCES, this publication is perceived by the population, generally, as a trustworthy source of information, with almost twice as many citizens considering it reliable as those who deem it deceitful. Furthermore, in terms of accuracy, *The Wall Street Journal* ranks significantly high, with only around ten percent of surveyed people ruling it to be inaccurate (NCES, 2021). Thus, statistic data lead to the conclusion that, as an authoritative bestselling national newspaper, this journal may mirror a specific and hegemonic political leaning—according to the Media Bias Chart, the WSJ skews right (Ad Fontes Media, 2021). In turn, it may also exert a considerable ideological and cultural impact on society.

Indeed, in consonance with John Richardson, “given the power and significance of news journalism to contemporary societies,” it is crucial that journalistic discourse be scrutinized from the perspective of CDA, so as to delve into—and tackle—social inequality issues (2007, p. 2). Focusing on the WSJ, the question that arises here is: what kind of attention would devote a well-established, conservative, business-focused journal such as the WSJ to BLM, a counter-cultural, popular, and social movement? Contrary to what could seem plausible, a quick search on the journal’s digitalized archive shows tens of articles devoted either entirely or tangentially to BLM. With tabloid-like headlines ranging from “The Myth of Systemic Police Racism” to “Race Relations in America Are Better Than Ever,” the WSJ takes a clear stance in favor of the criminalization of BLM. In the following pages, I conduct a corpus-based critical discourse analysis of this censoring process, so as to unveil the discursive and semiotic strategies employed to serve such purpose.

This article is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the theoretical approaches selected for this study and provides a critical review of some recent contributions to the analysis of the representation of BLM in journalistic discourse. Section 3 describes the corpus of analysis, delves into the methodological principles guiding this research, and formulates some preliminary hypotheses. Section 4 examines the most significant results. Finally, section 5 reassesses the initial hypotheses through the lens of the new findings and draws a critical conclusion derived from this analysis.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analytical framework selected for this text-oriented research is heterogeneous as it resorts to Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA), Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (hereafter CADS) (Partington *et al.*, 2013), and Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005). CDA explores the connections between language, power and ideology, while CADS relies on a computer-mediated analysis allowing the comparison of large collections of texts so as to discern relevant patterns of form and meaning which, otherwise, would be impossible to reveal. On the one hand, CDA is an approach to language use “that aims to explore and expose the roles that discourse plays in reproducing (or resisting) social inequalities” (Richardson, 2007, p. 7). Thus, a CDA analyst delves into social issues, focusing on the ways in which discourse may produce and perpetuate power abuse and domination. On the other hand, CADS is essentially comparative, and it combines quantitative and qualitative methods insomuch as it conducts a computer-based statistical analysis of word frequencies, keywords, collocates, and N-grams, whose results are then critically interpreted by the researcher through the exploration of co-texts and concordance (Cheng, 2012). Finally, Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005, p. 138) explores the discursive construction of interpersonal and evaluative meanings. More precisely, ‘Attitude: Judgement,’ the subsystem within this framework which has been selected to conduct a more qualitative analysis of the data, assesses human behavior by reference to social norms and ethics.

Focusing specifically on the representation of the BLM movement in journalistic discourse, both CDA and CADS have proved valuable approaches to conduct research. Before conflict escalated, in 2017, Meredith Bennet-Swanson explored media coverage of BLM and concluded that the movement “may be interpreted as an urban problem largely ignored by newspapers in Republican areas” (p. 122). However, she claimed, the importance of BLM cannot be overlooked, as newspapers coverage diverged from tweet coverage, which responded with high frequency to videos of police brutality (p. 123). A couple of years later, with increasing racial tensions, Janani Umamaheswar (2020), examined newspapers portrayals of BLM and suggested that, even though BLM’s goals were represented positively and from the perspective of members of the movement, the country’s leading newspapers sensationalized and politicized BLM, disproportionately focusing on supposed negative consequences.

In 2021, after the high profile killing of George Floyd by white police officers, Mahitab Ahmed explored the coverage of subsequent protests in *The Guardian* and *USA Today*, highlighting that they focused on convincing the readers with different point of views about the protests, rather than reflecting the real demands of the activists, and thus misinterpreting and banalizing the movement. Finally, most recently, Teresa Divine and Ginny Blackson (2022) have directly delved into the criminalization of BLM. These scholars claim that tabloid papers are one of the crucial reasons why the movement does not get the community support, as crime news tend to feature African-Americans committing felony against whites. This discourse discredits and trivializes the

movement, leading to the fallacious belief that it is a “criminal organization and even responsible for behavior that leads police assassinations” (p. 96). In conclusion, research conducted on media coverage of BLM through the lens of CDA suggests that, as conflict escalates, journalistic discourse tends to criminalize the movement, increasing social tensions and misrepresenting activists.

3. Corpus and Methodology

The *ad hoc* corpus compiled for this study consists of eleven articles from the WSJ, written by either the Editorial Board or full-time regular journalists. These contributions have been published between 2020 and 2021 and focus directly on the BLM movement. The corpus of analysis, consisting of 10549 words, has been scrutinized by means of the online interface Sketch Engine (Kilgariff *et al.*, 2004). Essentially, this corpus-managing tool has been used to automatically provide wordlists, keywords, and collocations. Following Cheng (2012), these concepts, basic to Corpus Linguistics, may be briefly defined as follows: first, frequency lists specify the total number of occurrences of a certain word in the corpus in an organized list. Second, keywords are those which are genuine to, or show a significantly higher frequency in, a target corpus, when compared to a larger reference corpus. For this purpose, English Web 2020 (enTenTen20), a general corpus of English consisting of 38 billion words, has been used. Third, collocates refer to combinations of words whose co-occurring frequency is higher than it could be expected by chance. Wordlists, keywords and collocations are automatically extracted and calculated based on statistical measures, thus reflecting a quantitative method of analysis.

The second stage of analysis, however, has become essentially qualitative inasmuch as the results provided by Sketch Engine have been critically examined through concordance lines and co-text. Furthermore, to enrich the qualitative analysis, the key tokens have also been examined through the lens of Martin & White’s Appraisal Theory (2005); more specifically, resorting to the category of ‘Judgement,’ which evaluates human behavior with respect to institutionalized forms. This category comprises judgements of social esteem and judgements of social sanction. The former includes the speaker’s assessment of ‘normality’ (how normative or usual someone is), ‘tenacity’ (how resolute and dependable someone is), and ‘capacity’ (how capable someone is), while the latter evaluates ‘veracity’ (assessing truthfulness) and ‘propriety’ (assessing ethical behavior) (2005, pp. 51-52).

To recapitulate, this study resorts to an eclectic analytical framework to conduct a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the representations of the Black Lives Matter movement in *The Wall Street Journal*, a conservative business-focused newspaper. Keywords, wordlists, collocations—and their respective concordance lines—will be scrutinized to obtain a profound and nuanced insight into the discursive strategies employed to censor the movement. Furthermore, the analysis will be enriched thanks to the insights of Appraisal Theory, allowing a more qualitative examination.

Drawing on previous research on the criminalization of BLM in media coverage (Bennet-Swanson, 2017; Umamaheswar, 2020; Ahmed, 2021; Divine / Blackson, 2022), this study is innovative inasmuch as it sheds light on how a popular movement demanding social equality and justice may threaten the hegemonic system sustained by the WSJ, as a social agent with clear political leanings.

Hence, the specific research questions addressed are the following:

1. Is the representation of BLM in the WSJ, a business-focused newspaper, enacted in terms of mere objective economic/financial interest?
2. What kind of discursive strategies are employed to delegitimize and criminalize BLM?
3. What does the WSJ's discursive construction of BLM reveal about the Journal's mindset and how is this narrative related to social inequality?

Regarding these research questions, the preliminary hypotheses sustained in this analysis predict that:

1. No. The representation of BLM will be enacted through an emotionally-charged, populist discourse appealing to the reader's biases and preconceptions, providing an ideologically motivated reductionist representation of the movement.
2. That discursive strategies to criminalize and trivialize BLM will be varied in both nature and form.
3. That, because of specific political leanings, the structural and ideological system supported by the WSJ feels threatened by a social movement fighting for justice and social equality.

4. Analysis of Results

Keywords allow us to delve into what is coined 'keyness' or 'aboutness' of corpora (Cheng, 2012, p. 7). Comparing the WSJ corpus with a much larger reference corpus, Sketch Engine has compiled a list of 50 keywords, which has then been subjected to detailed, qualitative examination through concordance lines, considering the larger context to which the tokens belong. To begin, keywords rapidly hint at the newspaper's criminalization of the BLM movement, which is described in terms of 'inauthenticity,' 'victimization,' 'victim-focused,' 'antipolice,' and 'left-leaning'.

Considering Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), in terms of Judgment of Social Esteem, the censoring process is basically enacted in terms of the category 'tenacity': the narrative portrays protestors as unreliable, ill-disposed and half-hearted agents—certainly, these qualities may derive from the Journal's constant emphasis on the movement's illegitimate victimization. As far as Judgment of Social Sanction is concerned, however, the attack resorts to both 'veracity' and 'propriety': first, the movement's alleged inauthenticity is constantly underscored in the WSJ's narrative; second, assessing 'propriety,' condemnation occurs as the journal equates words such

as ‘antipolice’ and ‘left-leaning’ to inherently unethical behavior. Indeed, analyzing the co-text of these keywords allows a deeper insight into the strategies employed to delegitimize the movement.

For instance, a well-known WSJ journalist states his view on the movement: “I gather that BLM is antipolice, crudely anti-Israel and not overly critical of the cruel looting that has accompanied many of its ostensibly peaceful protests.” This statement reveals subjective and emotionally-charged lexical items, such as ‘cruel’ or ‘crudely.’ Moreover, the movement is discredited by conjuring up fallacious arguments that do not belong to the discussion about the demands of activists, such as its allegedly ‘anti-Israel’ nature. This argument is deceptive and can be interpreted as an *ignoratioelenchi* fallacy, whose conclusion fails to prove the point in question: trying to censor the activists’ supposed ‘cruel looting’ to criminalize the movement, how is it also relevant that protestors are politically critical towards Israel? Indeed, this statement is resorting to previously existing political biases in the readership and, simultaneously, appealing to their emotions to delegitimize the movement. More significantly, this statement epitomizes how Judgment of Social Sanction is enacted in terms of ‘propriety,’ condemning the protestors for being unethical through deceitful and fallacious arguments.

Furthermore, ‘victimization’ and ‘victim-focused,’ keywords ranking at the top ten, also shed light on the WSJ’s purpose: discrediting BLM by arguing that current African-American identity is rooted over illegitimate victimization. Essentially, this position defends that slavery in the United States is an issue from the past which has been thoroughly overcome and bears no relation whatsoever to today’s society: “If only out of loyalty to our past, we will feel compelled to make victimization the centerpiece of our identity today”—writes the WSJ in its editorial. This position, thus, trivializes African-American past and present suffering and oversimplifies social inequality issues with ostensibly naïve statements such as: “the only achievement will turn us from the old victim-focused racial order toward a new, nonracial order.” Indeed, a nonracial order is everyone’s desire for the future—a future society with real equity and no racism—, but this will not be achieved whatsoever if structural social imbalance stays as it is. Thus, this ideological position invents a supposedly ungrounded “victim-focused black identity” as an argument to avoid social transformations and keep the world as it is—governed by white, male supremacy. In conclusion, the WSJ’s narrative constructs its Judgment of Social Esteem through ‘tenacity,’ condemning protestors for being allegedly unreliable and hostile as a strategy to deny their social claims.

Apart from keywords, **frequency lists** also provide a deeper understanding of the WSJ’s intentions. First, an adjective wordlist includes, among others, adjectives such as ‘dangerous,’ ‘radical,’ ‘false,’ ‘criminal,’ ‘left-leaning’/ ‘left-wing,’ ‘aggressive,’ and ‘deceitful,’ ranking at the top 50 positions. Through the analysis of concordance lines, it is obvious that these are all used to portray the BLM as an illicit, unjustified organization. Thus, in this regard, the delegitimization of the movement occurs mainly through Judgment of Social Sanction, by means of condemning both its veracity (‘false’, ‘deceitful’) and its propriety (‘criminal’, ‘dangerous’, ‘aggressive’). Second,

conducting a search for the noun+adjective wordlist (designed to unveil semantical nuances), the most frequent word in the corpus is ‘police’, with 75 tokens. This finding is highly significant and strikingly surprising, as it could have been expected the word ‘black,’ considering it is part of the movement’s name, to be the most frequent lexical item. Actually, ‘black’ occupies the second position, with 70 tokens. The question that arises here is: how is the portrayal of police officers, as opposed to black activists? How is it possible that a corpus of texts whose purpose is to criminalize BLM devotes more attention to the ‘police’ than to protestors themselves? At this point, it is essential that we turn to collocations.

In this regard, focusing on the analysis of **collocates** of ‘police,’ Sketch Engine offers significant results. An interesting collocation that is unveiled is ‘systemic police bias,’ whose further concordance analysis elucidates the WSJ’s stance: “the fake narrative of systemic police bias,” “the claim of systemic police bias,” or, still more directly, the “charge of systemic police bias was wrong.” Considering Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2022), as the examples above illustrate, this collocation is often accompanied by ideologically-charged words functioning as Judgment of Social Sanction, condemning the movement’s veracity once again. Indeed, as a collocate, ‘systemic police bias’ appears frequently in academic and journalistic discourses censoring police brutality and demanding accountability (Divine & Blackson, 2022). Instead, the WSJ has just used it to deny the existence of such concept, without providing any evidence to support their claim, since the statements function more as void political slogans than as reasoned arguments. However, this is not the only instance in which the WSJ hijacks the discourse of the oppressed so as to delegitimize it.

A significant example in this respect is the collocation ‘bad police,’ which appears in the WSJ corpus several times, always placed between question marks: “African-Americans fear for their safety from ‘bad police’ and black children must be instructed to tolerate police abuse just so they can ‘make it home.’ ” Indeed, quotation marks in this statement are used to disengage from the message and, simultaneously, to ridicule those who have supported that idea. By transforming ‘bad police’ into a common collocation in the corpus and by placing it inside quotation marks, not only is the WSJ oversimplifying an extremely complex social and political issue, but also denying the existence of police brutality. On the one hand, equating murder and systemic bias to ‘bad police’ ridicules the demands of BLM and distorts reality. On the other, summarizing BLM’s consistent, reasoned, and well-grounded discourse in a children-like expression such as ‘bad cops’ (which actually also appears in the corpus) is definitely showing a condescending and patronizing attitude towards BLM’s key speakers. Examining it through the lens of Martin and White’s Appraisal Theory (2005), this final example could be interpreted as an extremely stigmatizing Judgment of Social Esteem denying the capacity of the protesters: indeed, infantilization and condescension have traditionally been strategies to exert power over African-Americans throughout history.

5. Conclusions

Unfortunately, the scope of this article limits the number of examples than can be analyzed. Thus, the study has been confined to a reduced, but highly illustrative, selection of instances, allowing the reassessment of initial hypotheses in the light of new findings. To begin, regarding the first research question, the preliminary hypothesis proves valid: even though the WSJ is ostensibly a business-focused newspaper, the representation of BLM is not enacted in terms of financial interest whatsoever: indeed, qualitative analysis suggests that the WSJ never assesses the movement from an economical perspective. Instead, under critical scrutiny, results have shown that the representation of BLM is enacted by means of unreasoned, emotionally-charged discourse appealing to the reader's biases, stereotypes and presumptions, offering an ideologically-motivated reductionist portrayal of the movement.

Furthermore, as for the second research question, the initial hypothesis has also been proved. Discursive strategies employed to delegitimize BLM are inherently varied in form and nature. On the one hand, the WSJ appeals to a criminalizing discourse through the use of semantically-charged lexicon in order to portray the movement as an unnecessary threat to an already ideal society, in which racist attitudes belong to the past and have been overcome. On the other hand, the WSJ hijacks the consistent, well-grounded discourse of BLM activists so as to oversimplify reality, mock their demands, and ridicule activists, thus perpetrating colonialist attitudes such as infantilization and condescension, used throughout history by imperialist powers—and, currently, white supremacists—to discredit and subdue African-Americans.

Finally, the third research question deserves special attention. Indeed, it is essential to understand what the WSJ's discursive construction of BLM reveals about the Journal's mindset and how this narrative may be related to social inequality. After thorough examination, it may be argued that, because of a right-wing political leaning and a conservative mindset, the structural and ideological system reinforced by the WSJ is inherently threatened by a social movement, such as BLM, fighting for justice and social equality. Indeed, this idea shares common roots with notions like American exceptionalism and its strong connection with neoliberalism. Exacerbated capitalism, epitomized in Wall Street and, not surprisingly, perpetuated in *The Wall Street Journal*, is intrinsically based on social inequality and exploitation—and, to a great extent, supported by racial subjection. Thus, any attempt to subdue the hegemonic established system will always be perceived as a dangerous threat for those in power, as this analysis of *The Wall Street Journal* has exposed.

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