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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXCLUSION STRATEGIES IN THE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL ACTORS IN THEFT-RELATED POLICE BLOTTERS

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Abstract

This study analyzes the exclusionary discourse strategies used in theft-related police blotters in a police station in Region V, Philippines, applying Theo van Leeuwen's (2014) Representation of Social Actors framework. Using qualitative document analysis under the lens of critical discourse analysis of 33 police blotter narratives, the research identified the frequent use of suppression and backgrounding through nominalization, passivation, and agent/object exclusion. These linguistic patterns reflect institutional tendencies to obscure the roles of suspects, victims, and duty investigators, favoring depersonalized and bureaucratic reporting. While aimed at neutrality, such practices may compromise transparency and accountability in crime documentation. The study recommends integrating discourse awareness and actor representation in police writing training and calls for further research into inclusion strategies to strengthen justice-oriented communication.

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Introduction:-

The language used in police blotters carries significant implications. Words are never neutral; they are embedded not only with attitudes and ideologies but also with how speakers see the words work. Drawing from the assumptions that social action is not only oriented towards meanings but also towards strategies, and that social actors can be represented in language impersonally, the foundational tenets in Theo van Leeuwen's Representation of Social Actors (2014, 272), this study examines how police blotters linguistically convey or obscure actors while trying to achieve fairness, and accuracy, and truthfulness in reporting theft incidents in general.

Police blotters are defined in the Revised Philippine National Police (PNP) Memorandum Circular No. (MC) 2014-009 Crime Incident Recording System (CIRS) as "an 18" x 12" blue or pink logbook with hard-bound cover that contains the daily register of all crime incident reports, official summary of arrest, and other significant events/activities reported in the police station." True to this definition, the researcher was shown a large handwritten logbook upon request for theft-related records. In recent years, however, digitization of blotters has begun, signaling a positive move toward modernization and accessibility. Report writing remains central to police operations, as nearly every action undertaken by officers is formalized through legal documentation (Yu & Monas 2020, 36). These blotters serve not only as preliminary legal references (California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (CCPOST) 2022, 6-8; Aporbo & Concepcion 2024, 560) but also as transparent records that links testimony

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and evidence of arrests, incidents, and responses to one another and to the power of the institution (Seawright 2017, xiii; PNP-MC-2014-009, sec.2; Aporbo & Concepcion 2024, 560), and as bases for case mapping (PNP-MC-2014-009, sec. 2; PNP-SOP 2012-001, Rule 18), media reports (Suri 2023, 9), job performance evaluation (Yu & Monas 2020, 36), insurance claims (Suri 2023, 2, 8), and public information as part of the transparency commitment of the government though with restrictions (PNP-MC-2020-037 2020, 2). For such records to be effective, they must convey institutional legitimacy. As Max Weber posits, “Every system of authority attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy” (Dellmuth & Tallberg 2023, 19), and language is undoubtedly the most potent vehicle for these attempts.

However, achieving true neutrality in police language is exceptionally difficult. Despite attempts at objectivity, the language used in police reports can subtly reassign responsibility through exclusionary discourse strategies such as suppression, backgrounding, and depersonalization. A more pragmatic approach, therefore, is to identify these linguistic strategies and examine how they reveal patterns of institutional bias, role minimization, or protectionism. As entrenched in *People v. Sandig*, 454 Phil. 801, 8 f 2 813 (2003) that “police blotters are not conclusive proof of the truth of such entries, for these are often incomplete and inaccurate.” Yet, this document remains indispensable for facilitating investigations, preparing court cases, and defending cases in court (PNP-SOP 2012-001). Researchers, students, statisticians, the media, and real-party interests may draw their interpretations of the actual incident from police reports.

For instance, in *Flores vs. People of the Philippines* (2009, 830), SPO2 XXXM of Tibiao Police Station wrote in the blotter that:

...at the gasoline station along national highway Poblacion Tibiao, Antique, there was a noise heard by them while they were inside the said gasoline station, thus prompting them to verify outside. When they verified, they saw a man crawling and hiding himself, so XXXL fired a warning shot to identify the said person. However, the said person shot XXXS hitting him on his right hip breast...
(as written by SPO2 XXXM (617 Phil. 829).

Herein, the police blotter played a crucial role in resolving the case. Petitioner Flores relied heavily on the blotter that did not name him as being involved in the incident. Nonetheless, the Court of Appeals ruled that the police blotter's critical role in corroborating the complainant's testimony significantly contributed to the resolution of the case. The police blotter entries provided a timely and documented account of the incident, thereby supporting the complainant's credibility and the prosecution's case against Flores.

When police officers record incidents in the blotter, they naturally use linguistic elements to ensure the accuracy and comprehensibility of their reports. Mindfulness of metadiscourse markers, in addition to adherence to proper language mechanics, is indispensable, as these factors affect how the agent and patient actors are framed in the blotter entries. Hyland (2017, 18) affirms the presence of propositional material in a text, that “what is talked about,” but there is a more influential force behind it that can only be deciphered through metadiscourse. Metadiscourse is an umbrella term in critical discourse analysis (CDA) for the interpersonal resources that signal the presence of an actor and organize a discourse towards either its content or the reader (Hyland 2017, 18). This may refer to patterns of expressing relations between clauses, the structure of the text, the organization of information in relation to other parts of the text, hypertexts and intertexts, and other ways by which the text elaborates meanings to shape arguments to the needs and expectations of its target readers. In theft accusations, the verbiage may underplay, exaggerate, exclude, or reallocate the roles of the actors beyond their actual involvement in the incident based on the conscious and unconscious values of the writers; hence, this study was pursued.

Currently, no study examining the exclusion of actors in police reports has been found. Existing studies on police blotters have examined the texts' linguistic structures and genre (Aporbo & Concepcion, 2024; Sumaljag, 2018; Llabore, 2022). Aporbo and Concepcion's (2024) study, which relates to the present study, plotted the linguistic features in the thirty (30) police blotters documented from January to February 2024 in Tagum City Police Station and New Corella Police Station using Finnegan's language structure and use, Halliday and Hasan's Text's Connected Theory, Labov and Walezky's Narrative Theory and Riberio's moves of police reports which led them to the conclusion that linguistic features in police reports include technical jargon, archaic expression, doublet, compounding, formality, derivational morpheme, and sentence complexity. They also identified that the syntactic features are passives, prepositional phrases, unique determiners, parallel structure, participles, and relative clauses. These findings are useful in the current study, which also examines the linguistic features suggested by van Leeuwen (2014).

Sumaljag (2018) conducted a forensic linguistic analysis of 30 police reports from Davao, Philippines, covering a range of cases, including theft, shooting, murder, stabbing, and drug-related incidents. The study identified three main linguistic features, such as lexical, syntactical, and cohesive devices, used in documenting the sequential moves, such as complaint, investigation, and resolution, and steps that form the structural framework of official police documentation. The research emphasized the role of linguistic form in reinforcing procedural authority while subtly guiding how responsibility is perceived.

Llabore (2022), using Hyland's theory of metadiscourse, carried out a contrastive analysis of 40 blotter entries from Region VI and the National Capital Region (NCR). The study found that Region VI blotters demonstrated greater use of hedges and logical connectives, while NCR entries relied more heavily on evidentials to assert authority and factuality. Llabore (2022) concluded that awareness of metadiscourse markers significantly affects how certainty, neutrality, and institutional credibility are conveyed. The findings suggest that law enforcement personnel must be trained not only in procedural accuracy but also in the rhetorical strategies that influence how reports are interpreted by internal and external audiences.

The dearth in the study is primarily due to the challenges that Güss et al. (2020) whined about. Accordingly, police reports are a problematic data source for law enforcers, who may either decide not to release documents or share data incompletely (Güss et al. 2020, 2). There is also the possibility that the document may not be comparable across units and may contain biases. The current researcher faced some of these challenges herself, as requesting the data required several visits and firm assurances about the anonymity of the names. As the Municipal Police Station screened and selected the incidents for release, this study cannot guarantee the completeness of the details. However, Güss et al. (2020, 3), supported by PNP-MC-No-2020-037 argued similarly, providing impetus for this study: police officers operate under significant stress and frequently encounter disconcerting situations, which may lead them to downplay or misallocate individuals involved in incidents.

Given the apparent impact of police blotters, this study aimed to identify the actors excluded from them. Specifically, this paper answered the following:

1. What were the dominant discourse patterns of exclusion in police blotters?
2. Which of the actors were commonly backgrounded and suppressed in theft-related police blotters?
3. What do the discourse patterns reveal about institutional perspectives in official crime documentation?

Theoretical Framework:

This study is anchored on Theo van Leeuwen's (2014) critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework called Representation of Social Actors. The theory originated from the precept that, by analyzing the discourse in a text, an ideology can be exposed to understand how certain groups or individuals marginalize others. The way the material projects the incident about an individual, a group, or perception is called the representation (Ali & Bustam 2020, 40), "Representations include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended" (van Leeuwen 2014, 28). On the other hand, social actors are the participants in a social practice which encompasses agency, roles, and social relationships imbued with specific socio-semantic significance (van Leeuwen 2014, 23). This perspective provides numerous avenues for investigating incident report records, which is why this study focuses on analyzing the construction of actors in theft incident reports within blotters.

PNPM-DO-DS-3-2-13 (2013, 47-51) identifies seven (7) minimal numbers of people involved, and each plays a specific role in the blotter report, i.e., the Arresting Officer, Desk Officer, the Officer on Duty, Duty Investigator, the Head of Office or Chief of Police, in addition to the suspect(s), victim(s), and witnesses. Well-defined, van Leeuwen's (2014) metadiscourse can unravel interesting agentive linguistic patterns not only of inclusion but also the exclusions and role reallocations. Theo van Leeuwen (2014) presents a model for CDA that identifies how groups are positioned within discourse. Mubasyira et al. (2021, 163) shared that traditionally, this model demonstrates how dominant groups exert greater control over the interpretation of events, whereas less powerful groups are often inadequately described and marginalized. However, the model's scope for applicability and interpretation is extensive. The framework incorporates discourse markers of exclusion and inclusion, with the former being the focal point of this research. When a blotter writes, 'XXX appeared in this office,' it surfaces the image of 'a person' coming to the police station to report an incident. Van Leeuwen's metadiscourse demands to look beyond the syntactic surface for concealed actor(s). The office cannot welcome and serve clients; someone has to act on behalf of the 'office'.

Exclusion refers to the process by which social actors are omitted from the text and can be categorized as suppression and backgrounding (van Leeuwen 2014, 28; Ali & Bustam 2020, 41). Suppression involves a complete omission of the actor and any associated actions, leaving no trace in the representation. Typical linguistic realizations for suppression include six discursive techniques, which as mainly verb transformations: (1) nominalization of processes, (2) passivation, (3) adjectivized verbs in -ed and -ing participle forms, (4) infinitival clauses beginning with 'to', (5) agentive exclusion by attributing actions to objects and institutions and (6) object exclusion. Backgrounding, while employing similar discursive techniques, allows for the referent to be mentioned elsewhere in the text. When neither the nominal name nor the action references the group, the text can be said to employ (7) radical exclusion, effectively rendering the actor invisible within the discourse. (van Leeuwen 2014, 28-32)

Identifying metadiscourse markers is a tricky procedure, as the agents are nominally absent but are the usual actors in a social practice. "Social practices are socially regulated ways of doing things," as defined by Van Leeuwen (2014, 6), and CDA is an ideology detector. CDA "explores the connections between the use of language and the social and political contexts in which it occurs.... It might proceed from there to deconstruct and challenge the text(s) being examined" (Paltridge 2022, 213-214).

Materials and Methodology:-

This study adopts qualitative document analysis informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA), specifically employing Theo van Leeuwen's framework for analyzing the representation of social actors. The objective was to examine how social actors are linguistically portrayed in English-language police blotters concerning theft cases in the Philippines. The data consisted of thirty-three (33) incident reports recorded at a municipal police station in Region V, Philippines, in 2022 and 2023. The exact location cannot be disclosed due to the Data Privacy Laws in the Philippines.

The sample size was determined through data saturation, as patterns present in the 2023 records were already evident in those from 2022. This decision aligns with Creswell's (2022) guidance that qualitative sample size can be ascertained through data saturation, when "the additional collection of new data would not add substantially to the existing codes or themes," and through alignment with sample sizes in similar studies (89). The dataset size and approach are comparable to previous works in the same framework, i.e., Aporbo & Concepcion (2024), Sumaljag (2018), and Llabore (2022).

The analysis was grounded in the actor categories outlined in PNP-MC 2014-009 and PNPM-DO-DS-3-2-13, which identify the following roles: (a) suspect, (b) victim or reporting witness, (c) arresting officer, (d) desk officer, (e) officer on duty, (f) duty investigator, and (g) chief of police. The study also identified additional recurring contributors, labeled (h) ancillary persons (e.g., item finders or witnesses who supplement narratives). Analysis focused on the verbs and nominal elements related to the six exclusion strategies identified by van Leeuwen (2014): (1) nominalization of process, (2) passivation, (3) adjectivized processes, (4) infinitival constructions, (5) agent exclusion, and (6) object exclusion. Radical exclusion was initially in the category, but was removed as none was detected. Each construction was examined by asking, 'Who was responsible for the action?' to surface concealed agency.

To ensure the reliability and credibility of the findings, the researcher employed a triangulated approach, including bivariate coding, interrater checks, audit trails, and iterative engagement with the corpus. Ahmed's (2024, 2) four criteria for qualitative rigor, namely: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, guided the validation process. Prolonged engagement and multiple readings supported credibility; detailed documentation and coding protocols assured dependability and confirmability, while contextual descriptions aided transferability. The coding scheme followed a three-phase model adapted from Fife and Gossner's (2024, 5-7) Deductive Qualitative Analysis. Early coding involved repeated close readings and memo writing to establish coding consistency and refine operational definitions. Words, states, and nominals were examined for the responsible actor before color-coding according to exclusion type. Coded items were then categorized under the relevant discourse strategy. Each code was labeled systematically to denote the document number, year, exclusion type, actor initials, strategy abbreviation, and order of occurrence. To enhance analytic clarity, frequency tables were generated. The Consensual Qualitative Research-Modified (CQR-M) approach allows the placement of qualitative data into categories deductively, integrated with quantitative tables to reinforce thematic prevalence without oversimplifying interpretive depth (Flynn 2021, 382-383). This modified technique, combining thematic coding and frequency analysis, allowed

for a grounded yet scalable interpretation of how exclusionary discourse constructs institutional representations of theft-related events.

Results and Discussion:

Police blotters are intended to serve as factual records that uphold the integrity of documented incidents. However, beneath the surface of these ostensibly neutral narratives lies a consistent pattern of linguistic exclusion. This study analyzed 33 theft-related blotters, comprising approximately 5,000 words, and identified 746 exclusionary instances. Notably, the average length of each blotter entry was 152 words.

The text(1) below is a typical example:

- (1) XXX of xxx [cooperative] personally appeared to this office and requested to put into record that at around 8:40 am of this date, January 24, 2023, the duty guard xxx, 51 years old, married, and resident of Brgy. xxx, xxx [town], xxx [province] found out that the thin wires no.14, colored red and black, more or less 30m in length installed in the street lights of xxx [cooperative] were missing. Further added that the same were stolen by unidentified perpetrator/s. (PB#78)

Dominant Discourse Patterns of Exclusion in Police Blotters:

Suppression outweighs backgrounding in the collected corpus. Of the 744 total exclusionary expressions identified, 505 were classified as suppression, while 240 were classified as backgrounding, as shown in Table 1. Among van Leeuwen's (2014) exclusionary discourse strategies, nominalization emerged as the most frequently used, with 178 occurrences, followed by object exclusion with 146 and passive constructions with 140. In contrast, the relatively infrequent use of infinitival expressions and adjectival processes suggests that such constructions are less serviceable in formal police discourses, possibly due to their lower utility in abstracting or diffusing agency. Collectively, Table 1 reveals a textual architecture that recognizes depersonalized narration over transparent attribution, reinforcing the need to interrogate the ideological implications of institutional language.

Table 1. Exclusionary Discourse Patterns in Police Blotters

	Expressions of Backgrounding	Expressions of Suppression	Total
Infinitival expression	8	48	56
Adjectivized process	38	55	93
Nominalization of Process	61	117	178
Passivation	50	92	142
Agent exclusion	22	108	130
Object exclusion	61	85	146
	240	505	745

Nominalizations:

All six exclusion discourse strategies were identified in the collected police blotters, though their usage varied in frequency. Notably, nominalization, passivation, and object/agent exclusion emerged as the dominant syntactic structures, whereas no instances of radical exclusion were observed. Nominalizations or noun processes in '-ing', suffixation, and homographs or heteronyms constructions appeared repetitive and formulaic in the blotters. As van Leeuwen (2014, 30) explains, nominal forms may appear pre-modified or postmodified by prepositions, possessive pronouns, and/or connectors, producing standardized expressions, such as in "for verification," "after serving," "for disposition," "of stealing," "in settlement," "in possession," "of breakage," "of forced entry," "of intrusion," "upon checking," "for distribution," "in reference," "after investigation," "for confrontation/mediation," "of taking away," "for selling," "prior to locking up," "to ... examination," "his arrest," "to detention," "before sleeping," "upon waking up," "during scrutiny," "in the act," "after inventory," "for violation," "during review," "by manipulating ... and not issuing," "for booking," "to this reporting," and "without permission," among others. These formulaic utterances reflect a bureaucratic narrative style that tends to obscure agency and reduce individual accountability.

De-agentivized, the nominal form derived from the verbal form reduces dynamic processes to static entities, thereby transforming the process into a participant component of the clause. This grammatical shift portrays actions as involuntary occurrences rather than the result of human agency. In excerpt (2), 'selling' appears as an impersonal event that simply happened, obscuring the individuals responsible. To illustrate the difference in the effect, the

phrase “the money for selling” (2) possesses a different effect from the active construction ‘when he/she sold the paint.’ The former distances the actor from the deed, removing indicators of intent, whereas the latter makes the agent’s motive explicit.

(2) Further, three thousand pesos (P3,000.00) cash money was confiscated from the suspect, which was the money for selling two buckets of paint from a certain xxx.(PB#04)

Without actors, the alleged crime loses precision and risks being attributed to multiple individuals, thereby complicating the assignment of responsibility and delaying accountability. Četković (2017) posited that nominalization serves an avoidance function while the truth becomes available exclusively to the members of the police unit (171). In this way, such discourse structures conflict with the foundational values of transparency, accountability, and public accessibility that police reporting should uphold.

Nominalization also recasts a concrete, time-bound act into ideology, as Mubasyira et al. (2021, 165) have observed in news discourse on the liputan6.com page. The act is no longer about the specific situation, but is elevated to a principle or movement. The actor is shielded from blame while the responsibility is reassigned to a broader society or system. While individuals carry moral and social accountability, abstracted actions do not. As a result, the act appears procedural or technical, minimizing its emotional and legal implications. Nominalization, therefore, functions as a tool of institutional neutralization, projecting objectivity while potentially undermining clarity, transparency, and justice in reporting.

Object Exclusion:

Object exclusion occurs when the expected recipient of an action, typically a direct or indirect object, is omitted from the narrative, thereby disrupting the completeness of the event’s representation. Van Leeuwen (2014) illustrates this with the utterance, “Japan’s National Police Agency had to apologize recently,” where the absence of the intended recipient renders the apology impersonal and unaccountable. In police narratives, this strategy frequently co-occurs with infinitives, passivation, and nominalization. The latter, aligned with van Leeuwen’s (2014, 17) notion of “substitution,” recasts actors into abstract categories or aggregated classes, often concealing individual roles and redistributing responsibility. Object exclusion, therefore, can be adopted by omitting, substituting, or anonymizing key social actors.

In the corpus, object exclusion appeared 146 times (see Table 1), often resulting in suppressed actor visibility. Recurring formulations like “this station,” “this office,” “arrested person,” “the latter,” “the suspect,” “herein reporter,” “said reportee,” “their company,” “company raider,” “the minors,” “requested to put on record,” and others, suggest a routinized language that distances human actors from their actions and responsibilities.

The implications of object exclusion are particularly concerning in institutional documents like police blotters. First, when actors occupy the grammatical role of recipient, they are repositioned as passive rather than active participants. For example, in (2), “the suspect” functions as the indirect object of the verb “was confiscated,” reframing the suspect as someone acted upon rather than as an instigator. The conferral of authority on the unnamed agent (i.e., the confiscator) subtly reinforces institutional control while simultaneously diminishing the suspect’s agency and, thus, the legal and moral complexity of the suspect.

In another example (3), the substitution of a specific actor with an institutional label is apparent:-

(2) XXX, head department of xxx minimart located at... turned over to this station one (1) minor identified as XXXX, 17 years old, ... who was caught in the act by XX, inhouse security ..., in a possession of the shoplifted items. (PB#90)

While the ‘head of the department’ is clearly named as the initiator (nominative-initiator role), and the ‘minor’ is positioned as a passive object, the actual law enforcer receiving the minor is masked behind the generic term “this station.” This substitution weakens relational accountability by distancing the action (the turnover) from the responsible recipient (the officer). Such omissions obscure the institutional chain of command and, more critically, who is accountable for what actions, a serious concern in legal documentation.

Like nominalization, object exclusion contributes to institutional vagueness, allowing key roles and responsibilities to be generalized or omitted. Consider the formulaic expressions “requested to put on record” (1) or “turned over to this office” (3) - these remove identifiable subjects and actors, shifting the narrative tone from specific to

bureaucratic. As Diepeveen et al.(2021) warn, “investigators may treat the whole procedure as a pure formality and avoid engaging in further explanation or even offering an understanding check if these routines are not obligatory” (3),but procedural formality may jeopardize substantive clarity. In contexts where police reports serve as legal evidence, such ambiguity may reduce the evidentiary weight of the document and introduce interpretive risks of the rule of law during litigation (Diepeveen et al.2021, 3).

Ultimately, object exclusion, while appearing neutral, may reinforce institutional asymmetry. By omitting, substituting, or anonymizing key social actors, it subtly recasts the narrative as an impersonal sequence of events rather than a detailed account of individual and institutional responsibility. This erasure undermines both transparency and justice, particularly in documents where precision and attribution are paramount.

Passivation:

Passivation is manifested in the structure “receiver of action + was/were + past participle of the verb ± action initiator.” Grammatically, the actor may or may not be included in the passive construction. When mentioned, the actor is typically introduced by the preposition “by.”

In the dataset, 142 instances of passivation were identified (see Table 1), often functioning to suppress key actors involved in theft-related incidents. The corpus revealed a wide variety of passive expressions, including: “was called,” “were situated,” “were believed,” “were scattered,” and “was already open.” “was noted,” “was prepared,” “were conducted,” “were placed,” “was caught,” “were carted away,” “were stolen,” “was filed,” “was found out,” “was received,” “was personally handed over,” “was informed,” “was subjected to,” “was put,” “was arrested,” “was apprised,” “are turned over,” “are being” referred,” “cannot be located,” “be contacted,” “was sold,” “was dispatched,” “was identified,” “was confiscated,” “was seen,” “were summoned” among others.

Scholars have long agreed that passivation serves as a linguistic tool for exclusion. Idul (2019, n.p.) noted that while passive voice may signal the status of individuals, it also conveniently erases agency, either eliminating the perpetrator or even removing all actors entirely. This can distort perception, especially among those unfamiliar with institutional writing norms. In effect, passivation neutralizes the actor’s involvement and highlights either the consequence or the object of the action.

For example, in excerpt (4) below, the phrase “a case for theft was filed” omits the identity of the complainant or the officer who initiated legal action. Similarly, in (5), “both parties were summoned” removes the official authority responsible for the action. These removals compromise the clarity and traceability of official records, undermining their evidentiary value.

- (2) ... Upon follow up investigation, it was found out that the suspect for the said incident was a certain XXX of barangay.... A case for theft was filed against the suspect.
- (3) ...Both parties were summoned to Barangay xxx, xxx, xxx for confrontation/mediation... (PB#2)

These omissions become especially significant in legal proceedings. In Flores vs. People of the Philippines (2009, 830), the petitioner claimed that the absence of his name in the police blotter was employed by the defense as an indication of non-involvement, highlighting how exclusion via passive constructions can be used as legal evidence,or, conversely, be used to obscure liability.

As Putriani and Novia (2021) observe, passivation may at times be used to protect institutional actors or perpetrators (16), thereby contradicting principles of fairness. Unchecked, this practice compromises the legitimacy of the police narrative. Thus, while passivation may be appropriate for reducing redundancy or maintaining formality, its overuse, particularly in actor omission, undermines the clarity and accountability of crime documentation. In police reports, where specificity and transparency are paramount, conscious use of the active voice is recommended to uphold the integrity of institutional records and ensure alignment with democratic and legal ideals of justice.

Suppression vs. Backgrounding:

Suppression outnumbered the backgrounding in general. Suppression espouses the idea that actor(s) are omitted from the narrative. For instance, in statement (6), the image is that an “investigation” was conducted, the culprit has been named, and the culprit was the sole person in the incident. An uncritical reader may accept this information at face value. However, closer scrutiny reveals that an ‘investigation’ does not occur autonomously; someone initiated it and someone ‘identified’ the alleged culprit. These individuals, unnamed anywhere in the text, are the sources of crucial information and therefore occupy essential roles in the construction of the case. Ideally, such investigative

actions fall within the responsibilities of the duty investigator (PNPM-DO-DS-3-2-13 2013, 49), yet the linguistic form leaves this ambiguous. The actor could be the reporting person, the arresting officer, or any other involved party. By suppressing the identities of these actors, the narrative distances them from responsibility and accountability. These minimization techniques reflect more than just a stylistic choice; they contribute to a depersonalized institutional voice that obscures agency and minimizes scrutiny (Hold & Palmer 2020, 16).

(4) ...After conducting follow-up investigation, the female culprit was identified. (PB#02)

Backgrounding, on the other hand, subtly deflects attention from actors and reduces the salience of their involvement in reported incidents. This strategy allows the inclusion of actors in the discourse but places them in syntactic roles that diminish their perceived agency or significance (Ali & Bustam 2020, 41). For example, (6) indicates grammatical intent to drop the person who conducted the “follow-up investigation.” In (7), although the suspect was caught, the narrative downplays the accused by distancing the name of the individual from the act through the use of the pro-form “the latter” (7). Furthermore, the “act” of “stealing” (7), preceded by the article ‘the’ invites the focus on the strongly nominalized event, making the actor grammatically present but cognitively recessive.

(5) XXX... turned over arrested person XXXX ... after the latter was caught at around 7:15 am of this date May 7, 2023 at xxx Mini-Mart while on the act of stealing

(6) XXX, ..., reported into this office and requested to put into record that during the reviewe[d] of CCTV footages in xxx [establishment] by the in-charge supervisor XX, they discovered the theft incident that transpired last, ..., that in the video the warehouseman XXXX, ... was caught in the footage taking and carting away grocery items....

In addition to pro-formation formulations, whose prominence in police reports was also noticed by Casalan (2024, n.p.), police blotters also exhibit a recurring and almost formulaic pattern of backgrounding through genericization and substitution, most notably the phrases “this office” (which is also apparent in Flores vs. People of the Philippines, 2009) and ‘reportee’. The utterance “this office,” (1, 8) for example, while a recognized institutional entity, obscures a specific agent behind the act of “putting into record.” Backgrounding moderate responsibility for initiating or executing key actions, thereby contributing to a narrative structure that de-emphasizes accountability while maintaining the illusion of factual neutrality.

Backgrounding and suppression are linguistic realizations of actor omission, which others may view as manipulative, particularly as how blame and responsibility are allocated in criminal reports (Akinrinlola & Ajayi, 2021, 488). This practice is not entirely surprising. Bowden (2018) recognized the apprehension of police report writers that “some are concerned about being required to testify about what the report revealed” where testifying (Llabore, 2024, 3318; Aporbo & Concepcion 2024, 573) demands full accountability for the written details. A compelling parallel can be drawn from the findings of Jones et al. (2019), who found that in body-camera footage, civilians appear more prominent, thereby making the officer’s role in the encounter less salient due to camera angles and placement (2). As a result, the officer’s role becomes less visible, especially in instances involving the use of force, highlighting how framing influences perceived agency. Similarly, the police blotter serves as a narrative frame. What is included becomes the focus, while what is omitted invites ambiguity. Crucially, police narratives must aim to present a complete, accurate, and impartial account of precisely what happened (Aporbo & Concepcion, 2024, 561). The more gaps or vagueness within the narrative, the greater the risk of legal scrutiny.

Commonly Excluded Actors in Theft-Related Police Blotters:

The analysis of the dataset revealed the use of backgrounding and suppression strategies to obscure key actors in police blotters. Among the actors identified in PNP-MC 2014-009 (2014) and PNPM-DO-DS-3-2-13 (2013), the most frequently excluded actors were the suspects, victims, and duty investigators in the blotters, as supported by data in Table 2. Notably, these are also among the individuals most centrally involved in theft-related incidents. In contrast, the arresting officer and the officer on duty were the least likely to be excluded.

Table 2. Frequency of Exclusion of Actors in Theft-Related Police Blotters

Actors	Backgrounding	Suppression	Total
Suspect	78	59	137
Victim	93	40	133
Desk Officer	0	111	111

Officer on Duty	1	15	16
Duty Investigator	1	134	135
Arresting Officer	3	42	45
Law Enforcement Unit	45	24	69
Ancillary persons	19	80	99
TOTAL	240	505	745

This pattern reflects more than a linguistic tendency; it signifies entrenched institutional ideologies and strategic communication norms within law enforcement. Where language is a shared discourse, it also has the power to reinforce existing commonsensical ideologies, for instance, by choosing whose voices must be toned down and whose must be hyped. It is important to emphasize that this process is not the product of a conspiracy; rather, it is the outcome of the institutionalized professional imperatives of law enforcement as a social organization. The way ideology can be exposed is through what Amalia et al. (2019, n.p.) say, “by learning the language reflected in the text.” Such suppression is realized through a range of syntactic structures, nominalization, object and agent exclusion, passivation, adjectivized processes, and infinitive clauses, which function to depersonalize events and obscure accountability.

Suspects:

Suspects were more backgrounded than suppressed in the texts. References to them as actors, for instance, were embedded in nominalized constructions such as “in the act,” “by manipulating,” “for confrontation,” and “in possession of”; in passivized forms like “was stolen,” “was caught,” “was already open,” “were scattered,” and “was carted away”; and in object-exclusion phrases employing substitutions such as “the suspect,” “the latter,” “unidentified culprit/s,” “the accused,” and “the perpetrator.” Adjectival processes further obscured actors through descriptors like “shoplifted,” “confederating,” “pretending,” “missing,” and “forced.” Agent exclusion was evident in impersonal constructions such as “something wrong happened,” “incident transpired,” “theft incident,” and “was missing” (with “missing” ascribing to state rather than to act). Finally, infinitival constructions such as “to be carted away,” “to escape,” “to settle,” and “to return.”

Collectively, these linguistic choices reflect an institutional preference for depersonalized, neutral-sounding accounts that reduce the visibility of responsibility and suspect involvement in the documentation of crimes. However, though neutrality can reduce certain types of bias, it can also conceal or introduce new problems. Depersonalized language has a moderating effect on the assumptions of premature judgment, confirmation, and response biases, but at the expense of accountability and precise reporting. Lidén (2018) in their four-stage study confirmed that “police officers’ more guilt presumptive questions to apprehended than non-apprehended suspects indicate a confirmation bias” (1). A presumption of guilt may ultimately lead the police to exhibit behavioral confirmation bias during the interview.

By labeling them as “the suspect,” “the latter,” or “unidentified culprit/s,” the suppression and backgrounding can be interpreted as part of a strategic institutional neutrality. Maass et al.’s Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB) model explains this use of generic classes well. LIB forwards the human tendency to use abstract lexical categories to refer to the negative behaviors of the out-group and vice versa for the in-group descriptors (Schmidtke & Kuperman 2024, 2; Beukeboom & Burgers 2017, 6). The higher object exclusion of suspects through genericization further supports less positive perceptions among victims. By avoiding direct attribution, blotter narratives may seek to uphold the presumption of innocence, particularly in cases where the arrest has not yet resulted in a conviction. This aligns with the police’s bureaucratic responsibility not to prematurely imply guilt. However, it may also undercut the communicative transparency expected in public documentation.

Moreover, the substitution of vague or generic referents such as “culprit” or “perpetrator” could strip an individual of personal identity and specific traits, reducing their presence in the narrative to a procedural placeholder. While such linguistic choices may serve to protect identities or prevent defamation, it must be understood that they also erase important contextual details, such as motive, relationship to the victim, or history of involvement, thus distancing the actor from the act. Participants in the study of Yu and Monas (2020, 49) recognized that police report writers could also be affected by what Diepeveen et al. (2021, 5) call response bias, where the preference for one response option over the other could cause the dismissal of important information. Peripheral details could help make the report more complete and may prove important later in the investigation.

Victims:

Correlated with the dominant exclusion of suspects in the corpus is the almost equal exclusion of the victims in Table 2, by backgrounding more than suppression. Victims were more frequently underemphasized than the suspects in the discourse of blotter entries, often through adjectivized processes, agent deletion, and passivation. Excluded references to victims were detected in adjectivized verbs in -ed and -ing constructions, such as “unidentified” person, “identified by,” “hired” employee, “said” boutique, “belonged” to, “pretending” as a customer, “containing” her ID, “inventoried” items, “husband ‘suspecting,’” “prepared” by, “placed” on top of a table, “estimated” amount, “stored” in, “alleged” theft, “rented” room, “aforementioned” address, “owned” by, “prepared” by, “attached” on... truck, “involving” and the likes, as these actions hid their actors behind complementation. Genericized words that substitute the victims come in the words “reportee,” “reporter,” and “complainant.” Agent deletion is apparent in the subjectless clauses like “recovered from his possession...” (where the one who recovered is the victim), “Further added that...” (where there is intentional deletion of the subject), and clauses that attribute actions to inanimate objects like in “belongings... believed to be carted away.” Verbs in the passive voice also hid victims in “were situated,” “were believed,” “were caught,” “was identified,” “was seen,” “cannot be located,” “cannot be contacted,” “was filed,” “was received,” “was sleeping,” and the likes.

When victims in theft cases are marginalized using these linguistic techniques, it typically signifies, according to van Leeuwen’s framework, that the narrative of the crime report or description prioritizes elements other than the perspectives and experiences of the victims themselves. By burying the actors within their actions, these techniques elevate the actions themselves as focal points in the narrative.

- (7) ...At the house of the herein reporter, allegedly her plastic piggy bank (alkansiya), color light blue, containing cash money more or less php.60,000.00 was stolen by the latter without her knowledge.(PB#33)

For instance, in (9), where there was mention of “allegedly her plastic piggy bank... was stolen,” the entry understates who suffered the loss, who committed the crime, or who made the allegations, instead highlighting the amount stolen. Consequently, blotter entries often fail to adequately convey the emotional, psychological, and material impact on those affected, leading to an incomplete understanding of the crime’s context. Indeed, the PNP-SOP 2012-001 directs desk officers to succinctly record the 5Ws (who, what, when, where, why) and 1H (how) details. However, this procedural approach may foster a lack of empathy among readers and investigators, thereby undermining efforts towards restorative justice and accountability for perpetrators, as the human dimensions of the harm are not fully acknowledged.

Duty Investigators:

The most striking suppression in the collected blotters concerns the actions of the law enforcement unit and its personnel, particularly the duty investigator, whose role is central to incident processing. The said actor also has a crucial role in the recording of reports as per the PNPM-DO-DS-3-2-132013,49-51). While investigation-related actions are frequently mentioned (“investigation disclosed,” “was informed,” “conducting follow-up investigation,” “was put into custody,” “undergone booking,” “to put into record,” and “after verification”), the actor responsible for these acts was consistently absent.

There are multiple personal and institutional motivations behind this linguistic choice. One is to create an institutional voice in which the use of terms like “this office” and “the dispatched personnel” projects a bureaucratic tone, suggesting collective, routinized action rather than individual judgment. Gölbaşı (2017) hypothesized that “the power is generally operated by producing consent through discourses due to its disseminated structure over institutions” (5). The prevalent exclusion of law enforcers in LEU indicates consent to the form of discourse and serves as an institutional identity-building strategy. Bowden (2018), however, also acknowledges that obscured language is a liability management strategy when naming the investigator entails accountability to the court. Anonymizing their involvement serves as a protective legal-linguistic mechanism for plausible deniability and shields individuals from personal scrutiny or legal cross-examination. By erasing the individual investigator, texts can absorb actions into the collective “office” or “station,” thereby admonishing the faceless institutional command responsibility over personal responsibility (PNPM-DO-DS-3-2-13 2013, 66). This also contributes to the myth of objectivity, presenting the report as an impartial account rather than a subjective construction by a specific officer. Standardization could be the reason for the investigator’s suppression; template-driven reporting practices are necessary for administrative efficiency. However, such practices may compromise the completeness of legally and ethically required information.

The suppression of suspects, victims, and investigators in police blotters is not merely a stylistic choice but a reflection of the institutional priorities and power dynamics inherent in law enforcement communication. These omissions serve to protect the agency from liability, sustain the bureaucratic formality of the documentation process, and create an illusion of neutrality. However, they also risk erasing critical social actors from the narrative, thereby reducing transparency, weakening narrative coherence, and potentially obstructing justice. Addressing these linguistic practices is essential for promoting clarity, accountability, and ethical reporting in institutional crime documentation.

Institutional Perspectives in Official Crime Documentation in Theft Cases:

The discourse patterns in theft-related police blotters reveal an institutional orientation toward abstraction and depersonalization. Through systematic suppression of actors, official crime documentation reflects a communicative culture that prioritizes procedural coherence and organizational protection over narrative transparency. While these choices may serve administrative efficiency, they raise critical questions about transparency, accountability, and the discursive rights of both victims and accused within the criminal justice system.

The discourse patterns in theft-related police blotters reveal a consistent institutional tendency to distance individual actors, particularly law enforcers, from the reported events. This distancing is achieved through systematic application of exclusion strategies, particularly suppression and backgrounding, as outlined in van Leeuwen's (2014) framework on social actor representation. These linguistic patterns do not merely reflect stylistic choices; rather, they suggest a deliberate orientation toward depersonalization and risk management within institutional documentation practices (Di Gregorio et al, 2017, 133). The discourse patterns of 'policeseak' observed in official crime documentation, specifically police blotters concerning theft cases, reveal a deeply institutionalized practice of distancing human agents from criminal acts, both in their commission and investigation. Canning (2021, 66) raised the same concern, concluding that it is not the intentionality of these formulations that warrants attention, but rather that they affect the backgrounding and foregrounding of certain actors. "If lexico-grammatical features appear to consistently favor one perspective, voice, focalization over another, ..., then it raises concerns about police partiality of reporting ... incidents," wrote Canning (2021, 66-67).

Secondly, the prevalence of suppression, accounting for 505 out of 745 exclusionary expressions analyzed, suggests a systemic inclination to obscure the roles of individuals responsible for key actions. Actions such as conducting investigations, naming suspects, or initiating procedures are routinely represented in passive and nominalized forms, leaving the source of these acts vague or entirely unstated (e.g., "investigation disclosed that..." or "carted away the item..."). Agent deletion pattern serves bureaucratic objectives but simultaneously blurs accountability. The high frequency of nominalizations (n=178) and object exclusions (n=146) further evidences this institutional practice of transforming actions into abstract, actorless occurrences, where events are portrayed as happening without agents.

Similarly, backgrounding, though less frequent than suppression (n=240), performs a complementary role in reducing actor salience. In many cases, victims and suspects are not omitted entirely but are syntactically repositioned to reduce their perceptibility or agency. Terms such as "the latter" and "said suspect" substitute procedural or referential labels for individual identities, producing referential flattening, in which expressions deflect attention from specific individuals, effectively reinforcing a narrative of institutional neutrality while subtly managing perceptions of responsibility and involvement. The International Association of Chiefs of Police Model Policy (2020) on Bias-Free Policing presents two possible procedures for bias-free treatment in its description. The first model, adopted in the present dataset, requires that personnel "cannot consider specified characteristics unless the characteristic(s) are part of a specific suspect description"(5). The second model allows the inclusion of detailed characteristics associated with a specific suspect, provided clear guidelines, such as local relevance and the confluence of factors (5-6). The second model is encouraged in the era where everyone is treated as a unique individual.

The cumulative effect of flat strategies is a discursively sanitized narrative that appears factual and objective but is rhetorically curated to avoid implicating individuals, including law enforcement personnel, in processes that may later require defense or explanation. As a result, it opts for more general or indirect formulations to mitigate potential liability.

Moreover, these linguistic tendencies reflect what Di Gregorio et al.(2017) identify as the 'technocratization of institutional discourse', wherein the increasing dominance of technical and specialized language, often presented as neutral and objective, within institutions (134). Language, then, is used not just to report but to manage risk, maintain

institutional legitimacy, and protect organizational interests. This shift can lead to a depoliticization of issues, in which complex social and political problems are framed as technical challenges to be solved by expert knowledge, potentially marginalizing public input and democratic deliberation. In this light, police blotters do not merely serve as neutral repositories of factual incidents but as carefully constructed textual artifacts shaped by institutional logics and obligations.

The present study builds on this insight, showing that patterns of suppression, nominalization, passivation, and object exclusion not only shape how theft incidents are narrated but also reflect broader institutional tendencies to redistribute accountability. The frequent syntactic downgrading of key actors, particularly suspects, victims, and duty investigators, reveals how institutional texts may subtly 'write off' not only specific crimes or responsibilities, but also the discursive presence of certain individuals involved. It also raises important questions for future research. To what extent are these exclusionary practices pervasive across other types of criminal reports? What institutional interests do they serve? And how might such language use shape public trust in law enforcement or influence judicial proceedings? Answering these questions requires broader, multi-site investigations into the intersection of discourse, documentation, and institutional power in the criminal justice system.

Conclusions:-

Using Theo van Leeuwen's (2014) framework, this study revealed that theft-related police blotters systematically background and suppress key social actors through linguistic strategies such as passivation, nominalization, and object exclusion. With 746 exclusionary expressions identified across the dataset, the findings indicate a discursive tendency to distance human agency from criminal acts and procedural responsibilities. While this may reflect institutional caution or administrative convention, it risks undermining the integrity and transparency expected of official police documentation (Yu & Monas 2020, 38; Aporbo & Concepcion 2024, 561).

Language used in police reports is never neutral. The consistent exclusion or backgrounding of suspects, victims, and even law enforcers reinforces a detached, bureaucratic narrative style that can obscure moral clarity and complicate legal accountability. Such practices, though possibly unintentional, suggest a linguistic ideology that privileges institutional preservation over public transparency. These findings echo wider concerns about how law enforcement documents both crime and its human dimensions, raising critical questions about fairness, impartiality, and trust in official narratives.

To address these concerns, discourse awareness must be integrated into the continuing professional education of police officers, especially in their technical writing and report preparation. Training should emphasize the responsible representation of social actors and encourage clarity in attributing actions. Future studies may also investigate inclusionary discourse strategies to balance this study's focus and offer a fuller view of institutional language practices. Ultimately, reforming the language of crime documentation is not merely a stylistic revision, it is a structural imperative toward justice, transparency, and public accountability.

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