

**Playing the Blame Game: Discursive Constructions of Accountability in Lebanese News  
Coverage of the Beirut Port Explosion**

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Master's Thesis

*June 2025*

Word Count: 19,492

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the context of large crises, especially in politically polarized and fragile states, news media serve a critical role in constructing narratives that further shape public discourses. This study explores the discursive construction of blame in Lebanese digital news coverage of the Beirut Port Explosion from August 2020 to February 2021. This disaster devastated the capital and triggered public outrage due to Lebanon's pre-existing economic collapse and institutional paralysis. With formal mechanisms of justice dysfunctional, news media became a space to negotiate the production and attribution of blame.

This study explores how two ideologically diverse Lebanese outlets, The Daily Star and L'Orient Le Jour, constructed blame in the aftermath of the catastrophe. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), 40 digital articles were investigated through visual and textual tools over a six-month period. Integrating discursive strategies provided a framework to uncover how actors are represented, narratives constructed, and moral responsibility assigned or deflected.

The findings reveal two dominant discourses. The first discourse focuses on systemic blame, portraying the Lebanese state as a collective perpetrator. The discourse portrays the state as morally and structurally culpable in years of corruption, negligence, and political dysfunction that led to the explosion. This was reflected through emotionally charged representations of victims, protestors, and stalled legal processes. The second discourse is one of blame denial and deflection, emerging from elite discourses, where political actors avoided accountability through strategic procedural language, narrative ambiguity, and mention of sovereignty. These attempts included redirecting blame to foreign actors and painting accusations as politicized and baseless.

This study enhances the literature on news media and crisis discourses by examining how blame is negotiated when institutional accountability is lacking. It demonstrates insights into how journalism in fragile environments performs as a moral function, mediating public outrage and shaping narratives of justice, contributing to larger discussions on the performance of accountability in the Global South.

**KEYWORDS:** Blame; Beirut Port Explosion; Lebanon; Media Discourses; Accountability in Crisis

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## **1. Introduction**

Regarded as one of the worst financial crises ever, Lebanon's ongoing economic collapse has led to mass poverty, unemployment, banking paralysis, and hyperinflation. Rooted in a long history of political instability, this crisis is deeply rooted in corruption and systemic mismanagement, paralyzing the country and ultimately contributing to the collapse of its national system (Bou Serhal, 2021, para. 31). Following the Lebanese Civil War, which spanned from 1975 to 1990, the country has grappled with piled-up debt, which in 2019 equated to 150% of national output, ranking it among the highest in the world (Blair, 2022, para. 3). Additionally, the country's service-dependent economy added a strain to an unsustainable financial model that heavily relied on foreign investments, especially from Gulf Arab states (Blair, 2022, para. 6). This highly dysfunctional system, alongside a pervasive culture of corruption and neighboring geopolitical conflict, plagued the Lebanese economy, eroding the public trust in institutions (Blair, 2022, para. 5; Ltaif & Mihai-Yiannaki, 2024, p. 7). A final spark for the collapse in 2019 was an unprecedented wave of protests, which activated a freeze in foreign exchange, the exit of dollars, and the closure of all national banks, restricting depositors from accessing their savings. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic heavily impacted the economy, intensifying the crisis as well as distrust in the incompetent government due to its mismanagement in containing the pandemic (Corriero et al., 2022, p. 3). Triggering the next phase of the economic freefall, the capital city of Beirut experienced the largest non-nuclear explosion recorded on August 4th, 2020, leaving 218 people dead, 7,000 injured, and 300,000 displaced (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023, para. 4). This tragedy, induced by governmental neglect, caused extensive damage to Lebanon's infrastructure, healthcare, and economy, which were already in a dire state (Majzoub, 2023, p. 1). Within this context, multiple actors were involved in the decisions made, bringing Lebanon to its current fragile and polarized state. Amid this institutional and political dissolution, the media have become a central space where accountability is challenged, narratives are constructed, and public responsibility is bargained. Therefore, this study underlines the role of news media as an essential actor in constructing responsibility in times of national crises.

In this complex and unstable environment, especially in the era of digital journalism, news media play a crucial role in constructing real-time crisis discourses and informing citizens.

This challenges traditional media coverage and creates competing narratives of blame (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2020, p. 2877). In a highly polarized media landscape, Lebanese press freedom is often threatened by outlets that reflect sectarian, political, or corporate affiliations and ultimately influence accountability allocation (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021, p. 1202). In a time of heightened emigration, political instability, and financial uncertainty, the role of the media has been especially significant in people's understanding of the ongoing crisis. The role of digital journalism in these times can amplify political and ideological divisions and foster different accountability narratives, making it important to study how these stories are created and possibly challenged (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2020, p. 2876). This study will examine whether news narratives reinforce these issues or serve as a tool to affirm responsibility. Due to affordances of the digital era, the crises transpired in a mediatized landscape, where the media played a key role in shaping public perceptions through different constructions of blame, all within a complex Lebanese media landscape (Reporters Without Borders, 2018, para. 4). The diverse media landscape has become a key space for people to gain knowledge after a decline in trust in public institutions.

Furthermore, in such times, the media aren't merely reporters of the crisis but are actively shaping political narratives of accountability. Especially in fragile states where justice and transparency mechanisms are weak, the media serve as a ground where blame is attributed, responsibility is handled, and legitimacy is challenged. Camaj (2013, p. 22) shares that when institutional accountability is unproductive, the media can expose governmental wrongdoings, which in turn challenges and pressures the elites and power dynamics in a nation. This observation is especially relevant in the current digital era, where the media's role becomes increasingly critical. This is true due to the real-time dissemination of news of all sorts, that carries opposing narratives, during times of crisis.

Specifically, within the Middle Eastern & North African (MENA) space, media are proven to be catalysts in attributing accountability and engaging people politically, for example, through the Arab Spring. Through their analysis of the Arab Spring, Howard and Hussein (2013, p. 10) showed how digital platforms can deploy digital tools and strategies to enable the narratives they want. For example, they mention how Al Jazeera set a unique and groundbreaking style of storytelling in the Arab world during the increased tensions there (Howard & Hussain, 2013, p. 99). This approach allowed them to create compelling narratives

with a mix of local citizens and regional political elites, unlike foreign outlets like CNN, which depended on American commentators. The versatile media landscape of Lebanon fits into a similar context, showing how crucial it is to critically analyze the mediatized discourse surrounding blame construction.

In times of crisis, blame is often attributed, as institutions and individuals seek to make sense of what went wrong. The current research on blame attribution within news coverage during crises has been widely conducted in different contexts. The topics range from blame attribution during natural disasters, such as responses to Hurricane Katrina (Malhotra & Kuo, 2008), or even within populist discourses and communication (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2016). Some key findings from Vasilopoulou et al. (2013, p. 392) show that political actors in Greece utilized blame deflection and “us vs. them” narratives as populist discursive tools in the crisis. The use of these strategies reinforced the populist messaging by painting the citizens as victims and ascribing the blame to elites. Likewise, Hameleers et al. (2016, p. 886) highlighted that constructing emotionalized blame, especially with fear, can notably form public opinions and intensify populist intentions. This is especially true when institutional trust and political identity are weak. In contrast to these findings, which emphasize the deployment and construction of blame by political actors, this study will investigate how various media outlets construct and assign blame without institutional accountability. In addition, there seems to be a methodological gap in the discursive research of blame construction, where framing analysis is mostly utilized to analyze its practice. My study will academically contribute to expanding the literature of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) by looking at blame discourses in the media.

The abundance of research focusing on blame attests to the value of these constructions, especially in Western democracies (Shields & Goidel, 1998; Mortensen, 2013). Nevertheless, a significant gap remains in blame constructions in the Global South, leaving little attention paid to the constructions of blame in sectarian and polarized media landscapes, specifically in Lebanon. A comparative study on the depiction of the explosion was conducted by Abdullridah (2022, p. 1), using a sample including both Arab and Western media outlets. In contrast to that study, the present research specifically focuses on the construction of blame within a local context, thereby addressing a gap in the literature. Focusing on domestic news outlets in Lebanon will contribute to understanding the role of media discourses in digital news media in unstable environments.

Accordingly, this study asks:

*How was blame discursively constructed in Lebanese news coverage of the Beirut Port Explosion between August 2020 and February 2021?*

The research investigates the construction of blame in Lebanese media outlets at the height of the economic collapse, specifically during the six months after the port explosion in 2020. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)'s visual, linguistic, and discursive tools, the research will dive into the construction and reinforcement of blame in digital news reporting, using L'Orient Le Jour and The Daily Star as the study focus. L'Orient Le Jour, Lebanon's only francophone daily, is extensively read by the diaspora and is widely praised for its editorial independence. Nevertheless, the outlet maintains historical connections to elite political families. Lebanon's oldest English-language news outlet, The Daily Star, is known for its large audience and perceived connection to the Hariri-led Future Movement, which has influenced its editorial tone during the crisis. Understanding these contexts is central to comprehending how each outlet constructs blame narratives. This focus aims to answer the following research question:

By employing MCDA in this analysis, the study will contribute to research on polarized media landscapes, crisis communication, and discourse analysis within fragile states. This critical analysis of outlets with different affiliations will offer insights into how they shape narratives differently, according to the media owners. Additionally, this research will expand the study of how digital journalism influences political accountability and governance.

To explore the topic to further guide the analysis, this research employs a multidimensional theoretical framework. To start, the research outlines the political, economic, and media situation in Lebanon to understand the factors that shape crisis stories, including the country's divided political system and biased media environment. Additionally, this study examines theories regarding the role of media during crises, particularly in politically polarized states, using concepts such as narrative construction, agenda-setting, and ideological alignment. This section heavily emphasizes the dual role of media as an informer and also a social actor. Finally, the main idea of blame is carefully examined as a way of discussing issues, using research on how blame is assigned, shifted, and communicated in divided media environments. Jointly, these elements contribute to the analytical foundation for analyzing the discursive construction of blame in Lebanese digital news coverage of the Beirut Port explosion.

This thesis comprises five main sections. Following the introduction, the theoretical

framework offers an overview of the Lebanese context, the discursive functions of media, and blame construction. Following that, the methodology outlines the sampling strategy and data collection process, all with the use of multimodal critical discourse analysis as an analytical device. The fourth section contains a detailed analysis of the discursive constructions from L'Orient Le Jour and The Daily Star. Finally, the last section discusses the findings of the research in the light of existing literature, additionally providing practical implications, personal reflections, and directions for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Lebanese context**

#### **2.1.1. The Economic Collapse and the Beirut explosion**

The deepening economic collapse in Lebanon has gripped the nation for over half a decade now, rooted in intentional neglect and legacies of mismanagement (Siddique, 2022). This catastrophe was not coincidental but perhaps a reasonable outcome of a post-war neoliberal model, created in the best interest of sectarian elites, at the expense of sovereignty and stability (Daher, 2022, p. 5). Lebanon is at the forefront of major crises that have been inflicted by foreign and local actors, where it is played around like a pawn in a game of geopolitical chess, where it always loses. While the current crisis might seem like a recent development, it has been shaped by decades of structural weakness as an outcome of historical and political involvement. Lebanon was under a French mandate under the Sykes-Picot agreement after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Siddique, 2022, p. 16). The nation finally gained independence in 1943, carrying many sectarian complications along (Siddique, 2022, p. 16). As a tiny nation with a melting pot of ethnic and religious groups, Lebanon's systems and structures were constructed on fragile compromises in power-sharing, which are still prominent in current-day governance. After the war, a period of peace prevailed, but a simmering conflict eventually erupted, culminating in the 15-year Civil War (1975-1990). A mix of regional conflicts, unstable demographic dynamics, and the presence of non-state militias (the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Hezbollah) leads to the fragmented nation (Siddique, 2022, p. 16). Post-war, Lebanon's fragile political economy continues to struggle under systemic corruption and elite control, especially at the hand of Rafic Hariri, who contributed to regional inequalities due to his privatizing and reshaping Beirut for elite consumption (Daher, 2022, p. 9). International observers claimed that the "Ponzi scheme" financial model that the Banque du Liban implemented, under long-standing central bank chief Riad Salameh, was a main cause of this continued dysfunction (Blair, 2022, para. 6). Lebanese banks operated in a cycle of acquiring funds, mostly in U.S. dollars, to compensate for their debt, while offering high interest rates to draw in deposits (Daher, 2022, p. 13). The method required heavy inflow from foreign banks and diaspora, which then dried up, leading to a banking freeze, exchange rate collapse, and mass poverty. When the scheme collapsed in 2019, around 60% of deposits were condensed in 1% of

accounts, where the nation had moved \$87 billion in interest to banks over 30 years (Daher, 2022, p. 13). This pivotal moment exposed the flawed nature of Lebanon's economic model, revealing the systemic corruption and elite-driven favors. These circumstances helped set the tone for the 2019 mass protests and ultimate collapse that were catalyzed by the explosion.

A key escalation occurred in October 2019, when a nationwide uprising erupted as a response to high taxes on essential services, including the new tax on WhatsApp voice calls (Snaije, 2022, p. 1). From an external viewpoint, this seemingly insignificant step symbolized the government's disconnection from reality and marked the culmination of a protracted conflict (Blair, 2022, para. 21). The mass movement initially began as a protest against economic austerity and as a rejection of sectarian government and elitist mismanagement. The citizens united across all religions and classes, blaming all politicians involved in the government while chanting, "All of them means all of them" (Reuters, 2019, para. 4). The protests called for transparency, accountability, and the stepping down of all actors involved in extreme clientelism and corruption. The protests revealed the political class's disregard for basic needs and shattered the foundation of the established order in Lebanon. With that being said, banks closed for two weeks during the protests, which led to a banking freeze and the beginning of an ongoing imposition of limited withdrawals and transfers abroad and capital controls (Snaije, 2022, p. 6).

The most catastrophic blow politically, socially, and economically was the August 2020 Beirut Port explosion. The detonation, caused by government negligence, consisted of 2,750 tons of confiscated ammonium nitrate, which was stored in the port for approximately 6 years (Sivaraman & Varadharajan, 2021, p. 1). As the mushroom-like cloud arose post explosion, the nation suffered immediate losses, consisting of 200 deaths, 6,500 injuries, and 300,000 people displaced, and approximately \$15 billion in damage (Sivaraman & Varadharajan, 2021, p. 1; UNDRR, 2021, para. 2). Besides all the physical damage, the blast exposed much more of the corrupt government structures. Prior to the explosion, the port held significance as carrying the country's shadow economy; its control, unofficially assigned to past war militias, turned into political parties that were immune to interference from the government (Vierlinger, 2023, p. 9). Colonel Joseph Skaf, who eventually died of suspicious reasons, had warned about the mismanagement repeatedly, but the responsibility was passed on to the next, avoiding leadership in the case (Vierlinger, 2023, p. 10). Bureaucratic bypassing led to widespread blame construction and impunity on a political level.

The explosion shattered the city and eroded people's trust in the nation as a whole. With that came public anger over the tragedy and compounded negligence, which resulted in competing narratives of blame discourses. People accused Hezbollah of storing the substances for illicit purposes, while then-president Michel Aoun and Hezbollah accused an Israeli missile of causing the explosion (Vierlinger, 2023, p. 10). Civil society groups pointed to governmental neglect, with the Arab Barometer (Vierlinger, 2023, p. 3) claiming that 67% of the population placed the blame on “corruption and negligence.”

These rivaling narratives showed how blame became the key theme in clarifying the catastrophe, signaling a larger cultural and discursive fixation on responsibility in Lebanese society. Especially during times of political disintegration and crisis, there is an absence of academic literature that systematically studies how these narratives are discursively constructed in Lebanese media, despite their ubiquitousness in society. By analyzing the production, construction, and potential politicization of blame in Lebanese digital news coverage of the explosion, this research fills a gap. Grasping this gap is particularly essential due to the news media's role in amplifying, reflecting, and even shaping people's perceptions of accountability and justice during crises (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 256).

To further investigate the topic, the following segment discusses central features of the Lebanese media landscape, providing an important understanding of how discourses of blame may be constructed and divided by different outlets.

### **2.1.2. Media Landscape in Lebanon**

Media institutions in Lebanon are closely tied to the country's political power structures, continually reflecting and reinforcing sectarian elite interests. Amid the ongoing crisis, El Richani (2016, p. 7) claims that Lebanon's diverse yet politically polarized media landscape plays an important role in shaping social realities. Though the country has relative freedom of the press, the politically affiliated outlets are characterized by a considerable amount of political parallelism and tend to be owned by politicians and elites in power (El Richani, 2016, p. 7). The development of Lebanon's media landscape has closely followed political developments, where the parallelism is a legacy of the Lebanese Civil War, setting a precedent for the current partisan media sphere. The media have grown even more polarized after incidents such as the

assassination of Prime Minister Rafik el Hariri, as well as the interference of Syria and Israel within Lebanese politics (El-Richani, 2021, p. 5).

Media outlets tend to be owned or funded by certain sectarian groups and politicians, which leads to all-around political parallelism (Van Der Pas et al., 2017, p. 493), serving as platforms to promote their respective views. Instead of promoting the depoliticization of the Lebanese media environment, the sectarian divisions in Lebanon were reinforced by the 1994 Audiovisual Law. The law gave out broadcasting licenses in accordance with sectarian divisions, granting a larger fragmentation in the media systems, with diversity existing between outlets but not within them (El-Richani, 2013, p. 70). Furthermore, the only public broadcaster, Tele-Liban, is extremely underfunded, making it ineffective as a neutral source (El-Richani, 2021, p. 4). This results in the high reliance of Lebanese people on private partisan outlets, which are more accessible and popular. Digital news has become especially popular in Lebanon due to its convenience; however, because of the economic collapse, these platforms have promoted digital subscriptions and sought foreign funding, which in turn affects their editorial style (El-Richani, 2021, p. 12).

Ultimately, this partisan and fragmented media landscape is an active participant in Lebanon's political division. When foreign interference, sectarian interests, and ownership structures intersect, they create a polarized media environment, where coverage aligns with certain ideological and political interests (El-Richani, 2021, p. 12).

As a result, specifically in the context of the 2020 Beirut Port explosion, the role of media becomes essential as a source of information and a battleground for rivaling ideologies.

Therefore, the following section offers a review of the media's dual role as an informer, but most importantly as a social actor. Drawing on essential theoretical perspectives will be central to answering this study's research question, investigating the discursive construction of blame in Lebanese news coverage of the Beirut Port explosion.

## **2.2. The Role of Media in Times of Crisis**

### **2.2.1. Media as Informers and Social Actors**

To comprehend how blame is constructed in news media, it is essential to investigate the dual function of media as information providers and as social actors shaping meaning. As informers on one hand, the media provide citizens the information to shape common reasoning,

and on the other hand, as social actors, they shape their emotional interpretations of events (Joye, 2018, p. 4). Shen et al. (2014, p. 100) take a critical look at the role of news narratives and how they go beyond just informing. Emotionally charged narratives, commonly in times of crisis, are consequential in vulnerable political environments, where there is a lack of trust in public institutions, like in Lebanon. With this double function, news media not only reflect blame through the construction of narratives but also actively influence its legitimacy and direction. In this scenario, the news media intervenes by crafting narratives and assigning blame in specific directions.

The media construct narratives to make sense of things. These narratives rely on stories, which then produce cognitive and affective effects on people. Shen et al. (2014, p. 100) explain that narratives consist of a plot and a sequence of events designed to inform, which can transport audiences and engage them mentally. As a constructive form of human communication, the power of narratives in news lies in three components: the content, the pattern used, and the strength of their relatability. In a digital environment, narratives can be referred to as vehicles of “worldmaking,” according to Helgeson et al. (2022, p. 2), playing an important role in the framing of political events. Yet this constructive reality can also weigh in on inequalities, especially in partisan systems. Moreover, while Shen et al. (2014)’s study focuses on attitude shifts in readers, an implication of their research can be derived about how the structure of a narrative itself functions as a device for framing. Through narrative choices, the media act as discursive agents in making sense of crises, reflecting editorial choices that position the stories, in this case, the constructions of blame. The study demonstrates the inevitable and active power of the media as social actors, who create meaning and legitimize accounts.

Moreover, a normative perspective can be assumed to understand what it's like for the media to effectively inform. As quoted from Asp (2007, p. 34), “News media should give citizens information that enables them autonomously to form opinions on current issues.” Asp acknowledges the problematic nature of this principle, as it lacks a clear definition of the term “informative.” In that sense, it becomes difficult to measure and assess relevant information and its diversity, density, and depth. All these aspects of informative news are important in ensuring that coverage encourages independent and rational formation of opinions, especially during crises.

In Joye’s (2018, p. 4) study analyzing a Belgian disaster, he recognizes the informative

and constructive function of media in making sense of certain situations. Nonetheless, he highlights the societal functions of media, in his case recognizing its significance for all members of the community involved. News media actively select, produce, and narrate the production of crisis news, which is usually tied to certain political affiliations and beliefs, which is especially true of the Lebanese partisan media system. News media mirror prevalent social power structures and possess the authority to shape public opinions. Van Dijk (1995, p. 24) also supports this idea by emphasizing that the media hold power, going beyond just relaying facts to audiences. Rather than overtly coercing audiences to hold certain beliefs and gain knowledge, the media have persuasive and symbolic power to effectively influence them (p. 10). The media also possess the ability to control the access to discourse, which often benefits elites and silences opposing or marginalized perspectives (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 12). This imbalance, particularly during times of crisis, reinforces power structures because narratives tend to align with the affiliations of a specific media elite group. This effect is evident in Lebanon, where politically affiliated news outlets perpetuate symbolic control over narratives that often highlight the dissent of marginalized groups while simultaneously uplifting elites. The media not only report events but also shape the victim and perpetrator.

### **2.2.2 Media Narratives in Fragile and Polarised States**

Crisis narratives are ideological instruments, reinforcing the notion of the rarity of neutrality in news media. Jessop (2012, p. 5) argues that all narratives are fundamentally selective, formed by structural and discursive power that decides which illustrations subdue and which are repressed. Narratives in polarized states battle to represent and demote power, creating identities, undermining power, and attributing blame.

Building on Shen et al. 's (2015) take on persuasive narratives, Kreuter et al. (2007, p. 222) break down narrative communication as familiar because it's "a basic mode of human interaction." It is simply based on stories that are tied to a specific time, featuring characters and interconnected circumstances, and conveying messages about particular subjects. During crises, there is an opportunity to disrupt dominant narratives by creating openings for diverse conversations about accountability that can surface and compete against them. From a postmodernist view on crisis communication, Tyler (2005, p. 567) claims that the emerging narratives are not meant to restore order; rather, contested narratives of different versions of the truth come out. In fragile states like

Lebanon, this lens is valid, as crisis narratives are divided and loaded with political affiliations. Under these conditions, crises are performed discursively in the media, rather than simply reported, where stories mirror news outlets' interests and values.

There remains a lack of academic literature on region-specific analyses of these discursive crises constructions in polarized media landscapes such as Lebanon's. This research addresses that gap by analyzing how some outlets shape accountability and blame, uncovering how media reflect political and ideological interests.

Furthermore, Liu et al. (2020, p. 329) build on Seeger and Sellnow's (2016) typology of governing crisis narratives, consisting of blame, victim, hero, renewal, and memorial. The distinct social functions of these narratives serve a role of attributing accountability, inspiring resistance, or promoting healing. Individually, blame narratives serve to allocate responsibility, victim narratives to call attention to innocence and suffering, and hero narratives to uplift people for their actions (Liu et al., 2020, p. 329). Additionally, renewal narratives promote resilience, and memorial narratives address mourning and remembrance (Liu et al., 2020, p. 330). In this case, blame narratives are very powerful, with Liu et al. (2020) expressing the effects of exposure to them. They highlight that these narratives can increase attribution of governmental accountability while also mobilizing audiences with low public trust to have discourses of accountability and take political action. Lebanon's fragmented media landscape serves as an example of how certain narratives compete to dominate, also reflecting outlets' ideologies.

Looking into the discursive constructions of blame narratives in the following research is especially insightful due to its powerful engagement with accountability and legitimacy. Wyatt (2012, p. 181) critically dissects blame narratives through an ethical lens, stating that they are often ritualized. To elucidate, she expresses the adversarial culture of blame in the media rather than providing clearer justifications of attribution. In the case of Lebanon, where audiences and outlets are deeply polarized and driven by political and religious agendas, blame serves as more than just a narrative. Here, Wyatt (2012, p. 176) claims that blame has the power to include and exclude, further establishing what is morally permissible. The following section will tackle the agenda-setting role of the media, where it doesn't simply attribute blame but can amplify which narratives are more dominant.

### 2.2.3 Media's Agenda Setting

To examine how narratives are prioritized over others, this section inspects agenda-setting theory, which clarifies how news media decide the visibility and salience of blame narratives. Coined by McCombs & Shaw (1972, p. 177), the agenda-setting theory claims that the media tells audiences what to think about, rather than telling them what to think. They made the critical discovery during their study of the U.S. 1968 elections, where the results exhibited a powerful correlation between matters highlighted in the media and the voters' perceptions of priorities. Quoting Cohen in the research, the authors concluded that the media was "stunningly successful" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177) at gatekeeping the salience of information. The media conditions how audiences comprehend events through duplicating a particular, and most times patchy, version of reality.

In the case of this research, agenda-setting is important for comprehending how media discursively constructs and positions blame in times of crisis. As the study explores how blame was discursively constructed after the Beirut Port explosion in Lebanese digital media, agenda-setting creates a practical framework to investigate which narratives and individuals were highlighted or discounted. Overall, it aids in examining how these strategies contributed to the discursive constructions or deflection of blame.

The role of agenda-setting becomes more critical when uncertainty arises amongst audiences, especially in instances of crisis. As a result, the public experiences a need for orientation (NFO) (McCombs et al., 2014, p. 783), which pushes them to rely on the media to create meaning and interpret rapid events. The media does so by highlighting certain events and the discursive construction of actors and events.

McCombs et al. (2014, p. 782) revisit the agenda-setting framework, splitting it into first-level agenda-setting and second-level agenda-setting. The first relates to choosing what is considered "newsworthy." The second level, also known as attribute agenda-setting, is characterized by allocating a set of attributes to actors or institutions. Through this discursive emphasis of some features over others, the media is able to affect how the objects are acknowledged (McCombs, 2005, p. 546). In partisan media, such as Lebanon's landscape, these levels of agenda-setting serve as calculated discursive devices. This attribute, agenda-setting, can also converge with narrative shaping, especially when a single attribute becomes powerful

enough to characterize a major outlook on the coverage. These attributes, what McCombs calls “compelling arguments,” carry emotional and moral weight, contributing to highly effective narratives of blame (McCombs, 2005, p. 546).

Lebanon's high-choice and fragmented media environment proves the importance of considering agenda-setting frameworks in polarized nations. When the public consistently absorbs media that aligns with their ideological tendencies, they are limited to these narratives, reducing diversity and polarizing the public agenda (Chan & Lee, 2014, p. 302). McCombs et al. (2014, p. 793) also refer to this as agenda melding, where dominant media portrayals and personal beliefs create shared realities. In this case, different information is prioritized by diverse outlets, leading to competing understandings of accountability and why.

Therefore, considering agenda-setting in Lebanese media is necessary for this study’s research question. This concept exposes how different media outlets construct, or deny, blame in their content regarding the explosion.

### **2.3 Blame Discourses in the Media**

Blame functions as a social and discursive mechanism, serving as more than just a reaction to wrongdoing. This concept is a strategic meaning-making process that carries moral judgment, along with ascribing accountability. According to Malle et al. (2014, p. 148), blame involves ascribing individuals or institutions with responsibility for the violation of principles, deserving of reprimand. Quoting Bearsley (1970), “Blame, in all its forms, has a power and poignancy for human life unparalleled by other moral concepts ...” (p. 176).

The media hold the power to simplify this moral agency, particularly in times of crisis. Then, blame becomes indispensable to how events are shaped and high-ranking actors are positioned regarding accountability. Within Lebanon's fragmented media system, visual and textual elements construct blame as a crucial discursive mechanism.

Accordingly, the following section provides a conceptual foundation for exploring the constructions of blame in Lebanese media outlets after the Beirut Port explosion.

#### **2.3.1. Conceptualizing Blame**

What is blame, and what is it not? Blame is more than just a reaction to adversity; it is a uniquely human social-cognitive phenomenon (Malle et al., 2014, p. 147) where people assign

responsibility. Often this attribution is based on perceptions of causality, moral judgment, and intent. The allocation of blame is a discursive process that is constructed, negotiated, and contested in the media after a negative event. The media becomes a driving force in assigning blame, especially during the ongoing economic crisis and post-Beirut Explosion in fragile environments like Lebanon.

According to Malle et al. 's (2014, p. 151) Path Model of Blame framework, blame is a type of moral judgment molded by social cognition, which evaluates actors. The authors identify factors that help assess the people involved, not just their actions, including whether the situation could have been avoided, what caused it, and their intentions (Malle et al. 2014, p. 149). Inherently, blame is then constructed to make sense of malpractice through resonating emotionally and morally with individuals. In that case, it comes with many layers, answering what happened and because of whom, but also why they are morally responsible for what happened.

During crises, particularly in mediated political discourses, blame assists the public by simplifying complex realities and defining the moral boundaries between actors in stories. Therefore, blame functions cognitively and socially, and according to Malle et al. (2014, p. 176)'s properties, also “regulates social behavior, fundamentally relies on social cognition, and requires warrant.” In the media, blame is intertwined in cues through images, headlines, and text, not only reflecting it but also creating and validating it. Wyatt (2012, p. 181) argues that news narratives carrying blame have become ritualized. This expresses the normal and expected response in the coverage of a crisis, with outlets presenting the audience with a simplified story and a culpable one. At the same time, blame's performative tendency can also strengthen polarization and further marginalize and stigmatize, as its nature is still rooted in toxicity (Wyatt, p. 185).

In journalism, the construction of blame is considered healthy for democracy, as it addresses wrongdoings. However, journalists often divert from assigning blame explicitly due to professional norms of objectivity (Simonsen, 2024, p. 2). Alternatively, responsibility is allocated through the implicit discursive strategies, where accountability is demonstrated rather than expressed outright. Simonsen (2024, p. 6) notes that these implicit strategies are executed through causal constructions, where certain actors, contexts, and decisions are emphasized as the agitator of the wrongdoing. Drawing inspiration from Entman (1993) and Iyengar (1991), the

author highlights the role of framing in media outlets in emphasizing or omitting certain details and guiding audiences to certain chosen interpretations of a situation. Simonsen (2024, p. 3) employs the theory of causal stories to demonstrate the subtle, non-explicit construction of blame.

However, these discursive strategies are not always impartial. Simonsen (2024, p. 2) mentions how ideological orientation is central for the construction and distribution of blame. In her study of Danish and Swedish newspapers, Simonsen (2024) deduced that liberal outlets promoted self-blame and systemic failure, whereas conservative outlets highlighted individual or cultural responsibility (p. 7). While her study is based in a European context, this principle of ideological diversity is especially valid in media ecosystems like Lebanon's, where news outlets are affiliated with political groups, sectarian elites, and foreign-funded groups. In fragmented environments, where institutional accountability is compromised, the role of media becomes more essential. Highlighting Camaj's (2012, p. 23) work, the media plays a key role in covering for official accountability structures, then pressuring elites and exposing wrongdoings. This type of media coverage is not merely informative but becomes normative and adversarial, serving as a tool for political mobilization.

### **2.3.2. Blame in Fragmented and Polarized Media Systems**

While this research will address the gap in blame attribution in fragile states, especially those in the Global South, there exists a substantial body of research that focuses on blame construction in different media systems. The media uses these discourses to serve as strategic narrative tools to legitimize or delegitimize actors over others. In media systems like Lebanon's, there are larger political agendas subsidized by ideological and political affiliations. Repeatedly, the media proves to be more than just a reporter of news, rather a force in producing, assigning, and legitimizing accountability. This section brings together two important dimensions: firstly, the types of discursive constructions within identified literature, and then how they operate in polarized media systems. These insights will contribute as a conceptual framework for the analysis in this research.

Blame construction after a crisis is rarely incidental or neutral. Prior studies have identified key discursive strategies, each with diverse functions, that media use to allocate accountability and construct perceptions of responsibility. The typologies serve as a conceptual

framework for the analysis to identify how blame is conveyed, who it concerns, and what larger ideological roles it serves.

To begin with, Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman (2018, p. 1194) propose three ethical blame practices, consisting of action-based, virtue-based, and conflict-essence-based. These categories are fundamental in comprehending how media discursively constructs blame and the further ramifications for attributing accountability and further conflict resolution.

The first type, action-based blame, highlights what was done, issuing blame or criticism on specific actions, failures, and decisions. As the most common and direct recurring pattern of attribution in media, it is very apparent in post-crisis contexts. If constructed in an episodic manner, where news focuses on individual storylines with emotional addition (p. 1195), this type of blame aims to isolate bad decisions and broken promises. Thus, this indicates that the issues at hand are repairable, with a possible conflict resolution if better decisions are made. However, when constructed thematically, action-based blame suggests institutional failure that extends over time by highlighting recurring patterns of wrongdoing. This is reinforced through Liu et al.'s (2020, p. 341) understanding of blame narratives, claiming that when they are focused on specific defeats, they reduce the public trust in official messaging and increase construction of blame. Their study highlights how these blame constructions can spark moral judgment, especially in politically fragile environments, through the discursive shaping of audience opinions about accountability. In the context of this study, such constructions will be observed in media narratives that highlight negligence or failings of certain entities in Lebanon.

The second type, conflict-essence-based blame, attributes responsibility to broader political and historical complexity rather than isolated events or individuals (Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman, 2018, p. 1203). Here, blame focuses on ideological structures, ongoing injustices, and structural dysfunctions that enforce recurring crises. Accordingly, this theme is thematically constructed, meaning that the roots of dysfunction are deeply intertwined within the system itself, rather than an individual actor. These types of discourses suggest a sense of doom, reinforcing the idea of unlikely and impossible reform due to existing structures. Berti (2018, p. 1587) reinforces this idea within Italian media, where corruption is constructed as inherently permanent within a political system rather than the fault of individuals. The author identifies a systemic corruption narrative, defining it as a chronic condition of rule rather than an exception. In the analyzed texts, these narratives are often described by metaphors of decay and disease,

signaling moral collapse. Similar to Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman's typology, this concept shifts the notion of accountability from singular instances to deeply rooted systemic failure and institutional rot. In Lebanese coverage, these narratives may appear in the construction of systemic corruption and moral bankruptcy.

Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman's (p. 1195) third type, the virtue-based blame, centers on who the actor is, rather than simply just their actions. The blame type aims to feature personal traits like dishonesty, corruption, or greed, depicting individuals as morally unfit and inherently flawed. This type of blame is frequently used to invalidate actors, leaving no space for forgiveness or trust. To support this, Wyatt (2012, p. 181) supports this by illustrating how news narratives ritualize blame often, through the emphasis on individual failure. Simultaneous stories cast moral judgment on certain actors and assign responsibility. This shapes public perceptions of legitimacy while also playing a role in moral sorting, splitting the trustworthy from the non. In the case of Lebanon, these narratives can shape political figures and elites in ways that reinforce partisan divisions.

In addition, another key pattern of blame is populism. This discourse is characterized by assigning blame in a moral sense, where groups are also defined as morally corrupt elites or out-groups and compared to virtuous individuals (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013, p. 400). Distinct from virtue-based blame, which focuses on singular moral failure, populist blame works in a collective moral duality, often solidified through the narratives of "us vs. them."

Especially during times of crisis, these narratives emerge as political actors or partisan media utilize media to divert public anger towards out-groups, be they elites, institutions, or external entities. Vasilopoulou et al. (2013, p. 400) conducted a study during the Greek crisis, showing how elites were given responsibility for restraint measures, shaping the people of Greece as victims of betrayal. Though this study focuses on the Greek context, it is possible to consider similar populist narratives in Lebanese partisan media, particularly in events such as the explosion that carry political weight.

Similarly, Hameleers et al. (2016, p. 871) claim that populist discourses carry emotional weight, most times causing anxiety, anger, or hostility, which enhances their persuasive ability. By experimenting with Dutch populist communication, the authors argued that these emotional narratives can bolster populist attitudes and can increase blame attribution to political elites or "others" accused of corruption. This construction is made through recurring emotional language,

simplification, and regular use of ideological symbols. Da Costa Novais & Leite (2024, p...) also show how populist leaders and media, at times, switch the blame, shaping themselves as victims of the elites or media conspiracies. Populist blame inverts these traditional roles, empowering in-group identification and invalidating institutional entities and independent journalism.

Beyond discourses that assign blame to groups, systems, or individuals, a critical category is avoiding or denying blame altogether. Especially in polarized and fragile environments, like Lebanon, these constructions in the media can be utilized as a tool to protect actors from accountability, usually through strategic language, inclusion, or omission. Hansson et al. (2022, p. 63) assert that sophisticated cues, rather than explicit allegations, construct blame. These indirect strategies intensify polarization in a media landscape like Lebanon, deceptively steering the audience toward desired interpretations. Paradoxically, the absence of explicit allegations can improve the persuasive strength of these narratives, giving the media even more discursive power and grasp over public opinion (p. 78).

Hood (2011, p. 172) conceptualized blame avoidance and broadly divided it into three strategies. The first type is agency strategies, which are centered on institutional design, thus focus on the diffusion or delegation of responsibility by claiming it's always someone else's fault. Then, policy strategies, which focus on operational patterns that minimize exposure, and last, presentational strategies, which are discursive techniques employed to affect public perception post-crisis (p. 173). These strategies are very relevant in discourse analysis. According to Kuipers and Brändström (2020, p. 10), denial is usually a first line of defense in crisis management after a disaster. Following what they refer to as a "staged retreat," actors usually deny the problem, then deny the responsibility, and then eventually acknowledge failure as a last resort (p. 10).

Hinterleitner (2017, p. 222) adds a critical dimension to blame dynamics by presenting the concept of "blame generation." This strategy gives political elites a chance to influence and change the public perceptions of responsibility in times of failure. Blame becomes a dynamic discursive weapon, used to target opponents, point out wrongdoing, and protect allies. In fragile political systems with weak institutional trust, blame evolves into control narratives, communicated through media outlets that function as proxies for elitist discourses (p. 224). This is relevant in Lebanon, as media become an extension of political networks, where the news is shaped more by ideological and political interests, enabling the suppression or deflection of

accountability. Blame avoidance and deflection are also essential parts of this dynamic. Hinterleitner (2017, p. 234) proposes “politicized policy practice,” where political actors change their behavior to deflect blame rather than improve outcomes. This suggests media coverage in times of crisis, such as the explosion in Lebanon, could mirror elite blame generation and take part in blame deflection, particularly protecting certain figures and putting others in the limelight. Thus, this conceptual tool is important for comprehending the asymmetric nature of Lebanese media in discursively constructing accountability.

Altogether, these theories emphasize the notion that blame is not merely assigned but actively produced and reproduced through strategic, ethical, and discursive structures. In politically charged media environments, systems like indirect attribution, elite-driven blame construction, emotional moralization, and deflection prove the media’s ability to eventually shape narratives and then perceptions of accountability. Using these theoretical foundations has guided the study’s analysis of how blame was constructed in Lebanese digital news coverage of the Beirut Port Explosion between August 2020 and February 2021. By applying these typologies and employing MCDA to a new context, this study will contribute to clarifying how accountability is constructed and negotiated in fragmented states.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

To address the research question addressed in the introduction, this study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design aimed at exploring how blame was discursively constructed in Lebanese digital news coverage following the Beirut Port Explosion in August 2020. According to Brennen (2011, p. 15), qualitative research methods uncover meaning within specific social, historical, cultural, economic, or political contexts. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on isolating and numericizing elements to measure causal relationships, qualitative research is interpretive and theoretical, depending on language to understand human experiences and realities (p. 4). At its core, language is the most fundamental part of qualitative research, highlighting the need for discourse analysis in uncovering ideas and concepts that construct social realities (p. 14). A qualitative approach is needed to translate how meaning is constructed and then circulated in news discourses (Brennen, 2011, p. 15). This is especially important given the aim of this study. This aligns with the following study, which focuses on the construction of blame narratives, visually and textually analyzed through discourses to unveil the complex political, institutional, and moral messages they carry. Exploring these discursive constructions will present a better understanding of how these narratives are created and further share public perceptions.

Influential and important studies of news media inform my choice of qualitative research methods. Tuchman (1991, p. 79) argues that its aim is to uncover the operations of meaning-making and reproduction of ideologies and social patterns immersed in media narratives. In comparison to a reductionist approach, which approaches news as neutral information to be quantified, the qualitative lens views news as a cultural product, filled with political purpose and symbolic power (p. 80). Drawing from this, the study will approach discourses in news as narrative and discursive phenomena, holding the power to reinforce social and political hierarchies and help with the formation of political identity. Rather than positioning news as just factual reporting or as Park's (Tuchman, 1991, p. 80) notion of a modern equivalent of a town crier, it doesn't simply reflect events but shapes the collective consciousness around them.

### 3.2 Method

By implementing Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), this study focuses on the discursive dimensions of blame constructions in digital news narratives, specifically in post-disaster Lebanon. MCDA is a type of critical discourse analysis, which employs a deep analysis of textual communications to unveil the political and ideological undertones of discourse (Huckin, 1997, p. 79). In addition, CDA acknowledges the inherent power relations present in language and words, seeking to uncover them and find connections (Fairclough, 2013, p. 9). This means that rather than looking at the reporting of events after the explosion, this critical approach analyzes text using discursive strategies, which reflect and construct explicit and implicit meanings, contributing to the public understanding of accountability (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4).

Considered a social practice, the role of discourse in creating collective realities is imperative for those involved in the process. Using CDA, seen through a constructivist lens, enables language to be viewed as a tool that both shapes and is shaped by social reality (Bednarek & Caple, 2014, p. 136). News media doesn't simply report on current issues; it creates meaning and ideological stances, thereby fabricating public opinions and their progressive reproduction (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 256). This study aims to analyze these linguistic choices and implicit assumptions to expose how blame is assigned or deflected and how they reinforce or challenge power structures in Lebanon.

It is essential to recognize that news discourses do not operate in isolation but instead are intertwined with historic and institutional agendas, highlighting the value in exploring textual components but also broader phenomena, such as socio-political circumstances (Carvalho, 2008, p. 164). Carvalho explains that CDA exposes what is beyond just the text, including an analysis of discursive strategies used by social actors and the extra- and supra-textual effects of mediated discourses. This research method is well-suited for the examination of constructions within Lebanese news media due to its affordances in identifying transparent and ambiguous power relations shaped by media narratives. Its critical nature enables it to uncover dominance and authority through texts, which is especially relevant in the media context of Lebanon's polarized media landscape (van Dijk, 1995, p. 24). As political affiliations and sectarian polarizations overwhelm media outlets, discursive control constructs key events, such as the Beirut Port Explosion, in strategic allocation of blame. In this context, blame is not merely a response to

events but a political tool used to reinforce the ideological side and justify policy action.

Where CDA commonly explores texts within political speeches or news articles, MCDA offers a broadened scope of analysis, considering that contemporary media discourses are multimodal by nature (Machin & Mayr, p. 6). Visual elements in digital news articles, such as photographs, serve as semiotic resources that also help shape ideological viewpoints and contribute to meaning-making. Especially in Lebanese digital media, visual cues carry ideological weight, where the focus on simply the text would jeopardize the complete understanding of blame construction.

As a result, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) is an essential tool for examining how meaning is constructed through both visual and linguistic elements. There is a lack of neutrality in the choice of news outlets to present their headlines, photographs, captions, layouts, and font sizes in a certain way. These elements work together to emphasize certain narratives, influence interpretation, and position actors in ways that deflect or attribute blame (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 8). Through the huge standardizing effects of visual communication in mass media, ideological cues are purposefully embedded within (p. 1). Therefore, the incorporation of multimodal features is highly imperative in the case of Lebanon, where symbolic visual elements can be used to support or oppose criticism from different groups.

### **3.3 Sampling and Data Collection**

This study focuses specifically on digital news media during the Beirut port explosion, as their role becomes especially relevant in post-crisis situations. As primary sites for rapid news circulation and discursive construction, these platforms function as powerful elements to shape public understanding and collective memory (KhosraviNik, 2015, p. 287). As a space for the reconstruction of social and political realities, digital news platforms become ideal for MCDA-guided analysis, benefitting from rich data revealing power relations and ideological stances.

The study employed criterion-based purposive sampling. Campbell et al. (2020, p. 654) state that purposive sampling is especially efficient when the goal is to choose information-rich cases that permit in-depth analysis for contextual situations. Through the deliberate selection of articles, in my case meeting standards of explicit or implicit construction of blame through visual and textual elements, this method guarantees a relevant dataset in regard to critically answering the research question. This method also improves the transferability and credibility of the study

due to its systematic inclusion of diverse texts and outlooks while staying relevant (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653).

Additionally, articles below 300 words, lacking any form of blame discourse, and unrelated to the port were excluded from the analysis. Also excluded from the dataset were editorials, opinion pieces, duplicated articles, and photo-only articles

As a result, the selected outlets for this study were: The Daily Star and L'Orient Le Jour. Both outlets offer contrasting perspectives and stances, while also holding high relevance to local and international audiences. Both contributed greatly to the construction of blame after the Beirut Port Explosion, within the timeframe of August 4th, 2020 and February 4th, 2021.

Firstly Industry Arabic (n.d.) selected The Daily Star due to its accessibility and reputation as Lebanon's oldest and most prominent English-language digital news outlet. Founded in 1952 by Kamel Mrowa, the outlet was important, especially for the Lebanese international community (Reuters, 2021, para. 4). Due to its notable role in the 2019 Lebanese protests, The Daily Star was ranked the third most influential newspaper in the Middle East by Industry Arabic in 2020 (2020, para. 5). Although the outlet ultimately shut its publication down in October 2021 due to recurring financial difficulties, it held a significant role during the crisis under this study. (Al Arabiya English, 2021, para. 1). It is worth noting that the news outlet was owned by D.S. Holding SAL, a company closely associated with the Hariri family and Saad Hariri's Future Movement (Media Ownership Monitor Lebanon, n.d.). This association is believed to have affected their editorial tone, especially in limiting criticism of Hariri during the 2019 protests (Industry Arabic, n.d.). This affiliation adds significant complexity to the outlet's role in the discursive ecosystem, specifically towards the Sunni political elite in Lebanon.

Secondly, L'Orient Le Jour is Lebanon's only francophone daily newspaper, holding popularity among international and francophone communities. Through a merger of two competing outlets, L'Orient Le Jour was established in 1971 and has since committed to upholding values of democratic pluralism and cultural expressions (L'Orient Le Jour, n.d.). The outlet is known for its editorial independence, tackling subjects deemed taboo in Lebanon, like domestic violence and LGBTQ+ rights. Around 75% of the outlet's audience resides abroad, especially the Lebanese diaspora in Canada, France, and Gulf countries, which underscores its global reach and influence (Le Monde, 2024). An English-language sister publication, L'Orient

Today, was launched in 2020, in reflection of the evolving media landscape in Lebanon (L'Orient Le Jour, n.d.). Although it is praised for its transparency and independence, L'Orient Le Jour is partially owned by the Eddé and Pharaon families, both of whom have held positions as ministers, warranting consideration about its stance (Media Ownership Monitor Lebanon, n.d.).

Spanning across six months, the sampling period consisted of articles from August 4th, 2020, to February 4th, 2021. This timeframe was selected in order to capture both the immediate and the progressive discourse emerging post-disaster regarding accountability and responsibility. The final sample consists of 40 articles, 20 from either outlet, chosen with the aim to maintain balance across the timeline and represent a diversity of news articles. The articles were chosen based on a threshold of a minimum of 300 words in length, although most articles ranged between 1,000 and 1,200 words, which explains the moderate sample size for CDA, to prioritize depth and multimodal richness.

In terms of data collection, articles were collected from digital archives and through the selected Lebanese news outlets: The Daily Star and L'Orient Le Jour. To begin with, The Daily Star archives were accessed through LexisNexis Academic, as the outlet has not been in use since October 2021 and is no longer functioning in the same capacity. With an efficient filtering function, LexisNexis allowed for a searchable and reliable database for the English-language articles during the selected date interval. As for L'Orient Le Jour, the articles were accessible through the official website's archive and search tools.

Furthermore, the strategy taken for data collection consisted of manual screening of the articles after filtering them based on keywords, date, and word count. The keywords inquired about consisted of "Beirut explosion," "Beirut blast," "blame," "investigation," "Sawwan," "Diab," "accountability," and "responsible" in combination and with related terms. To acquire articles that are relevant for blame construction, the words were sent into search engines on the platforms. After gathering the articles, the articles were stored on an Excel sheet, where they were further evaluated manually to fit within the criteria of a minimum word count of 300, implicit and explicit referral to blame, and overall discursive depth. The latter was necessary to evaluate its suitability for MCDA.

Both textual and visual analyses were used for L'Orient Le Jour, incorporating visual elements like photographs into the analysis. We included the semiotic value of these elements because they contributed to the construction of blame. On the other hand, The Daily Star articles,

accessed through LexisNexis, did not have visual items, meaning only textual analysis was applied for this outlet, unlike L'Orient Le Jour. Articles originally written in French were translated to English for consistency, and they are all available in the result section.

All the articles were organized by date, also being stored digitally. The purpose of this period was to apprehend both the direct and immediate reactions after the Beirut Blast, along with the long-term narratives of blame over the 6 months after the explosion.

This careful and organized way of collecting data allowed for a clear and steady examination of how blame was discussed and presented in different forms after the explosion. The study aims to contribute to a new and deeper appreciation for digital journalism with the help of selecting distinct outlets.

### **3.4 Operationalization**

This study operationalizes blame as a discursive construction that can ascribe, redirect, or obscure accountability and responsibility. Textual and visual cues identify blame as an ideological and symbolic tool in media narratives.

Drawing from the theory, the examination of blame can then be identified through five types of constructions. Firstly, action-based blame is used to assign specific decisions and failures. Next, virtue-based blame (Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman, 2018, p. 1195): this type highlights the moral and ethical shortcomings of specific individuals, while conflict-essence blame assigns responsibility to larger institutional dysfunction. Furthermore, populist blame builds contrasts between “the people” and “the elite,” sometimes through simple and emotional narratives (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013, p. 400). Finally, blame avoidance consists of strategies that deflect or dismiss accountability through exclusion, ambiguity, or passive constructions (Hansson et al., 2022, p. 63). Together, these concepts guide the analysis of textual and visual elements of blame, promoting a systematic analysis of the construction and production of blame in media discourses.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The preceding categories were deductively drawn from the theory, while the analysis stayed open to an inductive identification of other transpiring patterns of blame across the research process.

The chosen dataset was then analyzed using MCDA, which allowed for a complete,

in-depth reading of linguistic and visual elements in the articles in the outlets differently. The combination of the semiotic modes, and lack thereof, constructs responsibility and blame. Firstly, the data was subjected to multiple readings to identify the most notable discursive patterns, adhering to CDA principles (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 254). If blame attribution was missing from an article, explicitly or implicitly, it was removed.

To start with, Machin & Mayr's approach to CDA was employed to strengthen the linguistic depth of the analysis. Specifically, the idea of word connotations was used to identify words or phrases that carry strong feelings or beliefs, which can shape the understanding of things through their implied meanings instead of just their direct definitions (p. 32). In addition, structural opposition was used to examine how binary constructions were used to clarify complicated political relationships and highlight certain individuals over others. Using these strategies is important to uncover how blame is constructed, using lexical choices to reinforce or deflect certain narratives.

In addition to CDA strategies, tools from the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to CDA were used to further analyze blame construction in the dataset. This method is important due to the integration of historical and socio-political contexts in the linguistic analysis (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 88). Five particular tools were selected for the text, emerging from Reisigl and Wodak (2009, p. 95). The first tools consist of the way in which actors are referred to, nomination, and the attributes assigned to these actors, being predication. Further, argumentation is used to explain logical patterns (topoi), which are utilized to explain blame or dispensation, while intensification or mitigation are used to identify how accountability is intensified or downplayed. Finally, suppression refers to the act of excluding certain voices from the text. These tools specifically function in a systematic way to analyze context-sensitive data.

Furthermore, to assist the analysis of social actors in the news discourse, van Leeuwen's (2008) social actors representation framework was applied. This framework systematically examines how groups or individuals are positioned in texts. The first tool to be employed was inclusion or exclusion, which touches on the presence of actors in texts, whether they are omitted or made visible, which can serve ideological purposes (p. 39). Secondly, the analysis employs activation or passivation to determine whether the portrayal of individuals is dynamic, active, or passive. These tools result in significant influences on how responsibility and agency are ascribed to actors, further aiding the analysis in identifying how media outlets position parties in

this blame game.

Eventually, the visual dimensions of these news articles were analyzed using Ledin & Machin's (2018) framework for visual analysis. The tools used for this study's visual, consisting of photojournalism, consisted of the representation of social actors (p. 70), so the individual or collective depiction, and also actions and indexical links (p. 73), such as gestures, expressions, and body posture. As photographs are still images, actions are not seen directly but instead deduced through visual cues, as indexical signs, proposing what is occurring or has occurred. In addition, gaze and angle (p. 76) were taken into account along with color (p. 65) in order to identify the viewer positioning and power and the enhancement of emotions. Hereafter, setting and context (p. 67) were important to the construction of blame, along with the inclusion or omission of certain actors. These tools were applied during recurring readings to identify visual patterns, further aligning with the textual analysis.

### **3.6 Credibility:**

The detailed description of the above research design ensures a transparent and replicable study (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). The systematic analysis of blame across different texts, using defined blame categories, will uphold a certain level of reliability and validity. In qualitative research, credibility is achieved through reflexivity, transparency, replicability, and methodological accuracy (Tracy, 2010, p. 839).

In qualitative research, credibility refers to the interpretation of results to be persuasive and plausible (Silverman, 2011, p. 361). To ensure this, the analysis underwent a structured coding process, where cycles of interpretation and memos were rigorously implemented to identify emerging themes. Through the use of MCDA and CDA tools such as predication, nomination, and connotation, among many others, a comprehensive and analytical data collection and treatment was ensured. In order to enhance credibility, analytical induction and recurring comparisons were utilized, after iterative reading of texts.

As Tracy (2010, p. 844) claims, transparent positionality and self-reflexivity enhance the rigor of qualitative research, improving reliability. My position as a Lebanese researcher shapes the interpretations made, due to cultural familiarity with the media and political landscape. However, there was a constant effort to reflect on possible biases, in order to provide reflexive

journaling and revisit data with critical distance to ensure fairness. A neutral tone was also maintained in coding, to avoid creating assumptions into the data.

In addition, this study relies on two media outlets within Lebanon's media and political landscape, which limits its generalizability (Silverman, 2011, p. 385). However, to ensure its transferability, purposive sampling and triangulation was applied across diverse discourses in visual and textual elements. Nevertheless, the study provided an insight into how blame is discursively constructed in a polarized and fragile environment

#### 4. Results

The goal of this study was to answer the following research question: “How was blame discursively constructed in Lebanese news coverage of the Beirut Port Explosion between August 2020 and February 2021?” The following section will tackle the results of my analysis, applying MCDA and CDA respectively in Lebanese outlets, L’Orient Le Jour and The Daily Star, in the aftermath of the Beirut Port Explosion. The results are organized in two overarching discourses: one of systemic blame (blaming of the state) and the other of blame denial and deflection. Furthermore, the results are also ordered in terms of density of examples, based on the findings of my data analysis, using 8-10 discursive tools for uncovering recurring discursive strategies. Throughout the selection below, blame was merely identified through actors; rather, the focus was on how blame was constructed, resisted, or deflected through symbolic and discursive strategies.

Using the MCDA and CDA approach, this study tackled a sample of 40 articles, applying the set of tools such as predication, nomination, structural opposition, connotation, and argumentation (topos). These tools were used to recognize recurring discursive patterns. They were applied to words and excerpts in order to reveal deeper narratives within the media. The analysis revealed two central discourses: Systemic blame refers to the Lebanese state's assignment of collective responsibility for the explosion, which is attributed to decades of longstanding corruption, institutional mismanagement, and moral negligence. The second discourse, of blame deflection and denial, pinpoints the resistance of political elites and institutional actors towards blame and further redirecting or neutralizing it through legal discourse, counter-narratives, or pleas for sovereignty.

Moreover, each of the discourses is further explored and dissected in separate sections, broken down into subsections based on main discursive strategies and returning themes. Though both L’Orient Le Jour and The Daily Star had similar narratives, the first highlighted moral and emotional language and visuals, while the latter involved more legal and procedural terminology, or elite-perspective narratives. The similarities and differences will further be emphasized where relevant in the upcoming sections, adding depth to the study.

## **4.1. Systemic Blame**

The most prevalent discourse within the sample was the construction of the Lebanese state as collectively accountable for the Beirut Blast. This major discourse positions the explosion as a result of deeply rooted corruption, neglect, and mismanagement on an institutional level. Instead of attributing the blame to individual political figures, the state as a whole system is constructed as morally corrupt and structurally failed. Through visual and textual cues and strategies, the state is painted as a complicit actor in the national disaster, rather than a neutral or righteous institution. This way of talking about the issue is clearly seen in both Lebanese digital outlets, which use language techniques like naming, describing, suggesting meanings, and showing contrasts. These tools overall portray the state as an entity that has betrayed its nation and its people. In this main discourse, the explosion is embedded within a broader narrative of political decay and political violation, rather than just an isolated accident, further shaping people's understanding of responsibility as inherently systemic. The following examples help build a story where the state is careless and part of the problem, highlighting that the explosion is a sign of serious issues within the institutions.

### **4.1.1. The State as a Collective Perpetrator**

Across the dataset, the most prevailing discursive construction to appear was the portrayal of the Lebanese state as a collective perpetrator in the disaster. Instead of attributing a single political actor as the culprit, the text shows the explosion as a culmination of long-lasting moral, structural, and political failure rooted in dysfunction. Both *L'Orient Le Jour* and *The Daily Star* portray the state as complicit in the contingencies that allowed for the explosion to happen. They merely portray them as simply being negligent or absent but actively show their participation in the deeply rooted mismanagement within the state.

The discourse of collective state responsibility is mainly built on strategies such as nomination, predication, connotation, structural opposition, and inclusion or exclusion of actors. Together, these aspects of MCDA work together to make the state seem omnipresent in its dysfunction, yet

evading blame. By doing that, the explosion is shaped as a side effect of systemic disintegration.



**Figure 1.** Screenshot from L’Orient Le Jour’s article. January 12th, 2021.

To begin with, a wide-angle image opens the L’Orient Le Jour article, strengthening the construction of the state as a collective culprit. The photograph, characterized by a grey sky, features a destroyed Beirut Port, with partially destroyed grain silos. In the front, graffitied across a damaged concrete ledge, is the phrase “MY GOVERNMENT DID THIS.” There is a clear and direct accusation, signaling grief and anger rooted in material space, engraved on the physical ruins. This symbolic image turns the debris into a semiotic space of protest. The destruction dominates the scene, contrasting direct blame with Ledin & Machin’s (2018, p. 67) use of setting and spatial contrast to dramatize both the physical and symbolic distance between the state and the suffering public. Foregrounding the destruction, the graffiti strategically places the viewer as a direct witness of the message. The ledge becomes a discursive platform, where the text works as a nomination and predication tool, where “my government” assigns agency, while “did this” implies accountability and wrongdoing. This shows how indexical links and text-image interplay shape ideological sense within MCDA (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 73). In addition, the exclusion

of human actors enhances the moral clarity of the allegation. According to van Leeuwen (2008, p. 28), using these tools in visual elements provides ideological purposes, removing the elite actors from the image while addressing them directly through the graffiti. This image serves as a symbolic and powerful accusation against state complicity.

A central example of this type of blame comes when the state is often referred to collectively or, individually, at times even anonymously. Through nomination strategies, blame is collectively constructed by naming who is implicated in the disaster. Vague nomination also assists in creating a blurred line between actors within the system, such as parties and officials, forming them into a single entity held accountable for the long-standing systemic collapse. In *The Daily Star* (2020, p. 1), an article reports, “Lebanese officials knew about the presence of the ammonium nitrate close to resident areas in Beirut for years but did nothing about it.” This generalization, through nomination, collectively categorizes actors, which in turn reinforces the idea of systemic inaction by avoiding individual attribution. This example closely relates to Simonsen’s (2024, p. 7) claim that liberal and centrist media lean towards general attribution when it comes to structural failure rather than personalized blame.

Nevertheless, at times, officials are named individually by name and official title: “Appointments for questioning former Finance Minister Ali Hasan Khalil, former Public Works Minister Youssef Fenianos, and former Public Works Minister Ghazi Zeaiter are scheduled for Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, respectively” (December 14, 2020, p. 3). Here, using nomination strategies that associate the individuals with their state position emphasizes institutional accountability. In this case, blame is not simply attributed to a person but rather to the roles they occupy and, by extension, the institutions they identify with. This linking builds the image of the state as a group of people with power, rather than a vague force whose collective failure is discursively emphasized. Along with predication, both these tools are used strategically to construct the group of politicians as an outgroup (Hansson, 2015, p. 302), collectively outcasting and negatively establishing the discourse around the morally bankrupt elite.

Similar to the pattern above, collective nomination is also found in *L’Orient Le Jour*, where Lebanese Patriarch Raï alerts of a potential collapse of justice, followed by the state itself. “Le cardinal Raï a en outre estimé que si "certains veulent déférer le dossier" de l'enquête devant le Parlement, cela risque de provoquer "la mort de l'enquête," qui serait alors "politisée par les

différents groupes parlementaires” (Cardinal Rai also warned that if “some people want to refer the case” of the inquiry to Parliament, this could lead to “the death of the inquiry,” which would then be “politicized by the various parliamentary groups” (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2020, December 20, p. 3). The general reference to “various parliamentary groups” for obstructing the investigation discursively implicates the whole legislative group. Through this nomination, Parliament is constructed as a compromised group rather than a space for legal deliberation. Once again discursively constructed as an outgroup, the collective nomination shifts the blame from an accident to a systemic sabotage of incompetent members of the state.

Beyond nomination, predication was widely identified in the texts as a central tool to identifying the discursive construction of blame. This strategy was used to attribute characteristics, qualities, or actions to certain actors after they were identified through nomination (Hansson, 2015, p. 302). “What happened here was a result of corruption” (The Daily Star, October 18, 2020, p. 2), stated by a protestor, is a clear discursive indication of the explosion resulting from systemic mismanagement. Followed by, “Many senior politicians, including President Michel Aoun, were aware of the existence of the ammonium nitrate that had been stored carelessly in a port warehouse for six years. None have been held accountable” (The Daily Star, October 18, 2020, p. 2); moral condemnation is imputed to institutional actors, moving beyond neutral reporting. In this excerpt, explicit naming of the president and the predication of reckless storage and the complicit silence emphasize the gravity of the situation and paint an image of deliberate inaction and impunity. This intensifies blame and indicates moral and political betrayal.

Similarly, L'Orient Le Jour quote “Baha'Hariri, homme d'affaires libanais et frère de l'ancien Premier ministre Saad Hariri, a fait assumer vendredi la responsabilité des explosions dévastatrices qui ont ravagé Beyrouth au Hezbollah et au gouvernement "corrompu"” (Baha' Hariri, Lebanese businessman and brother of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, blamed Hezbollah and the “corrupt” government for the devastating explosions in Beirut on Friday) (L'Orient Le Jour, 7 August, 2020, p. 10). Here Hariri assigns responsibility for the explosion, simultaneously naming institutional actors and using the term “corrupt.” This predicational sign positions the government as flawed and morally compromised. Hariri builds the foundation for systemic blame here by using nomination and negative predication, positioning them as unfit for governance.

Furthermore, in addition to direct attribution, the words and phrases used by the outlets carried underlying emotional, cultural, and moral meanings. By using connotation as a discursive tool, this analysis uncovered how vocabulary shaped the perception of blame and heightened the sense of deception and failure. The Daily Star quoted phrases such as “mired in an epidemic of selfishness...” and “crime against humanity” (The Daily Star, September 13, 2020, p. 1) to describe the pervasive and toxic system responsible for the disaster. These expressions anchor the discourse around national failure, extending accountability beyond individual actors to a system of deep political rot.

Another L’Orient Le Jour example shows a grieving father who lost his daughter saying, “Le Liban est devenu le tombeau de la vérité.” (Lebanon has become the tomb of truth.) (L’Orient Le Jour, February 3, 2020, p. 3). Similar connotative strategies appear here, through the emotional statement, which positions the state as actively burying justice and transparency due to its incompetence. Both the death of the victim, along with the values of accountability and truth, are evoked in the phrase, weaving the state as physically and symbolically destructive, destroying what it is meant to protect.

In sum, the articles depicted the Lebanese state not only as failing as an institution but also as collectively responsible for inflicting harm on its people. Following this negative construction, it is the victims, their families, and citizens of Lebanon who voiced their demands for truth and justice. Blame is not merely only depicted through reporting, but through mourning, protest, and resistance. Altogether, these examples uncover a recurring pattern: the discursive construction of blame is completed through naming and depicting the state as an unidentified, interconnected system in which actors are either anonymized or made representative of institutional decay. This further reinforces the narrative of the explosion as a byproduct of systemic rot rather than a momentary failure. The next section will explore the use of symbolic language within Lebanese digital media outlets.

#### **4.1.2. Victimhood and Moral Outcry (Popular Discourses)**

Beyond the narrative of institutional failure, a strong counter-discourse appeared in which victims and protestors took back moral agency, using protest and grief to challenge elite silence and injustice. This theme emerged from the analysis of victims, their families, and protestors reclaiming blame through their discursive constructions. This section focuses on how public

discourse allows for blame to be expressed and reinforced through the voices of individuals and their protest movements. In the aftermath of the explosion, these groups appeared as discursive agents of moral accountability rather than passive receivers of damage.

Through emotionally charged testimonies, the results of the analysis aligned with Hameleers et al. 's (2016, p. 890) concept of emotionalized blame attribution, in which emotional and grief-stricken expressions help push narratives of elite culpability to the public. Proponents of Vasiopoulou et al. 's (2013, p. 400) research also add that within crisis politics, discourses of victimhood are important devices to delegitimize members of the state, thus allocating moral judgment to “the people.” Within the Lebanese context, many media narratives employed this construction of victimhood to enhance collective narratives of popular resistance. The following will unfold through the use of tools such as connotation, intensification, structural opposition, and inclusion/exclusion.

Discourse constructs victimhood through emotional testimonies and symbolic imagery, transforming loss into accusation. In *L’Orient Le Jour*, this is exemplified through a grieving father saying, “Je veux savoir qui a tué ma fille. Elle n’a pas choisi de mourir en martyre. Elle est morte dans sa maison.” (I want to know who killed my daughter). She did not choose to die as a martyr. She died in her own home (*L’Orient Le Jour*, February 3, 2021, p. 2). This excerpt invokes structural opposition and connotation to reverse the sense of sacrifice and heroism, portraying the victim as an unintended target of institutional failure rather than another casualty of circumstance. The purpose of using structural opposition as a tool here is to emphasize meanings through creating binary contrasts (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 39). Against this backdrop, the oppositions lie amongst guilt and innocence, safety and harm, and innocent life and political violence. Contrasting “maison” (house) and “martyre” (martyr) situates the victim’s death as a violation of fundamental human security rather than a selfless sacrifice. Subsequently, personal spaces become symbolic and political crime scenes, where mourning turns into a discursive act of resistance.



**Figure 2.** Screenshot from L’Orient Le Jour’s article. February 3rd, 2021.

Visual cues strengthen this construction. The images are merely a neutral addition to the article but were placed as a strategic semiotic resort for blame construction. For example, an image accompanying the above L’Orient Le Jour article depicted Dr. Nazih Aden and his wife mourning the loss of their daughter due to the tragic blast. The image carried symbolic meaning through the composition, color, and placement of participants. The image used muted color tones and somewhat close proximity to the individuals in order to create a sense of intimacy and anguish without sensationalizing the moment. These elements align with Ledin & Machin’s (2018, p. 100) claim that the arrangement of participants, along with color composition, can enhance emotional intensity and affirm moral legitimacy. Additionally, the posture and facial

expressions of the parents work as indexical signs of grief, both downward gaze and frown signaling intense emotional pain without needing explicit claim. This engages with implicitly recognizing the state's failure due to the visual weight of loss.



**Figure 3.** Screenshot from L'Orient Le Jour article. February 3rd, 2021.

Similarly, the opening image of the article includes relatives of a victim of the explosion holding an image of a lost loved one. The composition highlights collective suffering by grouping the women together against a seemingly protest-like background. This type of visual element can emphasize discourses of solidarity and grief, portraying the collective aspect of grief against the absent state (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 71).

Overall, both images hold the same theme, an absence of political figures, serving as a critical discursive function. The inclusion or exclusion of certain elements within images shapes viewers' interpretations of accountability and blame, contributing to meaning-making. The absence of the state here suggests its silence and abandonment, reinforcing the textual discourse of systemic failure. Therefore, these visuals construct a moral image of resistance through

illustrating suffering, where state absence becomes a strong symbol of betrayal and neglect.

The credibility of state blaming by victims' families is further enforced through L'Orient Le Jour's portrayal of the families of the ten firefighters who died on August 4th. The article does not simply focus on their grief but centers the conversation on the demand for institutional accountability. Quoting Antonella Hitti, representative of the victim's families, she states:

Dans ce contexte, les familles des dix pompiers qui avaient été déployés le 4 août dans le port, quelques minutes avant le drame qui leur a coûté la vie, ont réclamé lundi la levée de l'immunité judiciaire de tous les responsables impliqués dans cette catastrophe ainsi que des informations sur le suivi de l'enquête en cours, menaçant d'une "escalade" si leurs revendications n'étaient pas entendues

(Against this backdrop, the families of the ten firefighters who had been deployed in the port on August 4, minutes before the tragedy that claimed their lives, demanded on Monday the lifting of the judicial immunity of all those involved in the disaster, as well as information on the follow-up to the ongoing investigation, threatening an "escalation" if their demands were not met.) (L'Orient Le Jour, October 5, 2020, p.4)

Through the inclusion and activation of the victims and their families here, the article proposes that these families are actively resisting the state and deserving of justice. According to van Leeuwen (2008, p. 39), when social actors are included, they are not just representational but serve as a discursive sign of presence and moral legitimacy. Along with their activation in the text as agents of protest, the families speaking their truth are actively changing the narrative of moral justice. On the other hand, the vague reference to state officials can be seen as a form of exclusion from the text, which, according to van Leeuwen (2008, p. 43), is suppressing their presence from the incident, blurring the lines of responsibility in this context. The text further includes the names of the 10 firemen "...Ralph Mallahi, Rami Kaaki, Elie Khouzami, Charbel Hitti, Joe Noun, Nagib Hitti, Sahar Farès, Michel Hawa, Joe Bou Saab, and Charbel Karam..." (L'Orient Le Jour, October 5, 2020, p. 4), turning the vagueness of the loss into personal injustice. The text also employs implicit structural opposition, where public grief, or the victims, is compared to elite immunity, emphasizing the popular discourses of the state as culprit. This is then further intensified by engaging connotation through phrases such as "Nous ne permettrons pas que la corruption piétine nos droits..." (We will not allow corruption to trample on our

rights...) (p. 5) to emit their protests as resistance against the institutional silence and denial.

Echoing the resistance, *The Daily Star* discursively builds civilians as agents of change, rather than victims of a flawed system. In one of the articles, one year after the October 17 uprising, the protestors return to the streets of Beirut with anger and renewed calls for accountability. A teacher protesting shares, “Change needs time, and corruption has rooted in over the past 30 years” (*The Daily Star*, October 18, 2020, p. 1), involving connotation and intensification, using language to strengthen the discourse of systemic blame. This invokes a topos of historical failure and deep dysfunction. Using topoi creates an accepted line of reasoning, connecting arguments to a certain solution (Wodak, 2017, p. 95). In this context, this implicit warrant proposes that this systemic corruption demands a radical change of system. Correspondingly, chants such as “All of them means all of them” (p. 1) also invoke a topos of collective accountability, insinuating that all individuals of the political class are equally to blame and must be expelled from their positions. These chants also operate as ways to nominate the whole political elite and group them as a group bound for condemnation. This reaffirms Hameleers et al.’s (2016, p. 890) emotionalized blame attribution, where slogans and protests become public rituals of responsibility, becoming a tool to demand justice and accountability.

Overall, these discourses of grief and protest serve as a function to challenge the elite authorities and reaffirm the legitimacy of civilians. In line with Liu et al. (2020, p. 330), the emotional and visual narratives here collectively create popular discourse of justice. The authors describe popular discourses of blame as unmet moral expectations, which, in this study, victimhood becomes a discursive tool to reassign moral legitimacy and demand accountability. This works as a form of resistance, shaping a counter-narrative that shows that the explosion was not an accidental occurrence but a deliberate outcome of negligence. The upcoming section will explore how legal ambiguity and judicial deadlock can reinforce systemic dysfunction when discursively constructing blame.

#### **4.1.3. Institutional Dysfunction and Legal Paralysis**

The final dimension of systemic blame discourse highlights the construction of blame at the hand of institutional paralysis. Instead of overt denial, many of the articles exposed an extensive pattern of delays, silences, and legal complexity. Discursive tools such as nomination, predication, passivation, exclusion, and more topoi helped identify structural paralysis of legal

and political institutions, further delaying, diluting, or obstructing the delivery of accountability through vague legal structures and bureaucratic complexity.

A symbolic example of the discursive construction of the relationship between justice and national stability emerged in the text, revealing that institutional mismanagement has heavy consequences. Quoting the Patriarch Béchara Raï in *L'Orient Le Jour*, “Si la justice tombe, toute la structure de l'État s'effondrera” (If justice falls, the entire structure of the state will collapse (December 20, 2020, p. 1). A topos of consequence is present in this phrase, connecting the functioning of the judiciary to the survival of the state. The inference is clear: the failure of justice creates a national existential threat, with the argument showing constructing dysfunction as an active danger, fueling national collapse. This argument suggests that judicial inaction is not neutral but harmful, highlighting the idea that systemic failure sustains instability.

The discourse of institutional dysfunction is accompanied by visual elements in the *L'Orient Le Jour* article on the assassination of retired Customs Colonel Mouni Abourjeily. By using Ledin & Machin's setting and indexical links, an emotional visual narrative emerges, as the accompanying image shows a symbolic landscape of systemic silencing. In combination with the destruction and omission of state actors, a convergence emerges to signify violence-enabled exemption. The image's muted colors and absence of individuals highlight how the setting and context of the image enforce a theme of exclusion. Altogether, both the visuals and text intensify accusations of silence and fear, further affirming the image of judicial paralysis and perhaps complicity in the crime.



**Figure 4.** Screenshot from L’Orient Le Jour article. December 3rd, 2020.

This structural decay is further emphasized through Patriarch Raï’s quote, “Il y a des problèmes autour des prérogatives judiciaires, comme si les personnes impliquées dans l’enquête se rejetaient la responsabilité les unes les autres... Le silence est parfois synonyme de suspicion, et le retard est synonyme de silence.” (There are problems around judicial prerogatives, as if the people involved in the investigation were blaming each other.... Silence sometimes means suspicion, and delay means silence) (L’Orient Le Jour, December 6, 2020, p. 3). This passage invokes exclusion through avoiding specific names, rather obscuring and grouping, further diluting the responsibility. In addition, a topos of suspicion emerged from the analysis, suggesting that the delay in procedure promotes distrust. The final sentence in the passage also carries a deep connotative weight, alluding to the fact that what may appear neutral, in this case delay and silence, can be politically and morally charged. In the context of the investigation, silence then symbolically becomes complicity, and delay is compared to interference.

In addition, this legal procrastination is further reinforced through the consistent use of passivation, predication, and nomination. In The Daily Star "We are interested in the

continuation of the judicial investigation into the Beirut Port explosion," Rai said. "If some prefer referring this file to Parliament ... we fear that the investigation will die and will be politicized by the parliamentary blocs." (The Daily Star, January 6, 2020, p. 1) employs both predication and topos of consequence. Corrupt institutional interference leads to a destructive outcome. The term "death" emphasizes the vulnerability of the investigation in light of elite obstruction.

Similarly, passivation exhausts the visibility of agency. From the same article, Judge Sawwan "...was forced to suspend his probe for 10 days after his decision to charge caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab and three former ministers of negligence in the case came under fire and was legally challenged as unconstitutional" (p. 1). This removes him as an active agent, challenged by the shielded political actors, escaping from direct blame attribution. In addition, the decision-makers behind this suspension are excluded here, which obstructs audiences from assigning accountability. This discursive strategy protects powerful individuals from inspection while constructing the judiciary as powerless.

The reaction to Sawwan's charges extends the discrediting of legal efforts. Hezbollah and the Amal Movement accused Sawwan, saying "... the investigations should be shielded from politicization and that Sawwan's decision was a breach of the Constitution. According to the judicial source, Sawwan is pursuing the officials based on information that constitutes criminal offenses and not for breach of duty and political responsibility that would otherwise be tried at the Supreme Council to try presidents and ministers." (The Daily Star, December 14, 2020, p. 1). The use of topos of legality invalidates the charges through the displacement of the legal authority of the judge. Although Sawwan's efforts are proclaimed as lawful, the skepticism surrounding his authority aids the discursive construction of legal paralysis, where institutional tools stall justice instead of advancing it.

L'Orient Le Jour challenges this legal obstruction, repeatedly demanding the lifting of judicial immunity. It was stated in an article, "...ont réclamé lundi la levée de l'immunité judiciaire de tous les responsables impliqués dans cette catastrophe ainsi que des informations sur le suivi de l'enquête en cours, menaçant d'une "escalade" si leurs revendications n'étaient pas entendues." (...demanded on Monday that all those involved in the disaster be stripped of judicial immunity and that they be updated on an "escalation" if their demands were not met.) (October 5, 2020, p. 4). This reflects another example of topos of consequence, suggesting that in the

presence of immunity, responsibility cannot be attributed. In this case, impunity intensifies, amplifying public distrust in the legal system.

## **4.2. Blame Deflection and Denial**

In contrast to the central narrative of systemic blame, a notable secondary discourse emerged, focusing on blame deflection and denial. Generally constructed by political elites and institutional actors, this discourse actively repels accountability, avoiding it through structural and discursive mechanisms, to alter accusations of wrongly attributed actors as neutral and morally justified. While the precedent section discourse uncovered how institutions were constructed as complicit, this discourse functions to point out narrative direction, denial, and legalism.

This discursive resistance to blame was seen across L'Orient Le Jour and The Daily Star through deploying predication, nomination, passivation, exclusion, connotation, and topoi of legality. These strategies were used by elites to reposition themselves as victims, further providing a discursive shaping of denial. The upcoming sections will explore three patterns of blame resistance, further reconstructing the explosion as miscredited and overly politicized.

### **4.2.1. Elite Rebuttals and Strategic Denials**

Among the broader discourses of blame deflection, a pattern of resistance emerges through explicit denial and discursive refutation of elite actors. The individuals self-legitimize through employing strategic communication structures, allowing them to position themselves as wrongfully accused, morally safe, or victims of politicization. These practices are especially found in statements produced by actors such as then Prime Minister Hassan Diab, then President Michel Aoun, and then Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. Rather than seeking justice, this behavior functions to reshape narratives of accountability and preserve institutional authority.

To elucidate, these actions relate to Hinterleitner's (2017, p. 222) concept of blame generation, in which individuals firstly avoid accountability and then try to restructure public opinions by creating counter-narratives. The following examples show the discursive denial strategies that help elites construct themselves as ethical actors and reshape narratives as untrue or politically motivated.

For example, The Daily Star claims, "Diab refused to be questioned, saying his 'conscience is clear.' Sawwan rescheduled the questioning session for 9 a.m. Friday..."

(December 14, 2020, p. 1). This complex discursive move is not of minimal effect, but through predication, Diab constructs himself in a state of moral clarity, assuring Judge Sawwan and audiences of his innocence. This behavior aligns with Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman's (2018) virtue-based discourse, where he doesn't simply claim lack of involvement but grounds himself in his character rather than his actions. In addition, the use of "conscience is clear" is emotional and morally loaded, used as a connotative signal of ethical purity. This performance of innocence shifts the register of accountability from legal accountability to an ethical value, influencing the audience's view of him as a victim or hero. This relates to Liu et al.'s (2020, p. 329) study on narratives, wherein hero and victim narratives, blame is not only resisted but reversed, portraying elites as either helpless victims or active defenders.

"According to Aoun's media office, the investigation into the blast was not discussed during the Higher Defense Council session on Dec. 8, and therefore all reports that allege the president interfered with the investigation are fabrications" (The Daily Star, December 13, 2020, p. 1). Here, Aoun denies interfering in the blast investigations, using predication with words like "fabrications" to delegitimize criticism. Hood's presentational blame avoidance is reflected here, through the use of tools to deflect criticism and protect legitimacy in times of crisis. Furthermore, intensification is also involved, where the loaded word is part of an orchestrated discursive defense of the President. Instead of engaging with the claims, Aoun constructs an opposition between the truth and misinterpretation, in which he claims to be truthful. This use of structural opposition between honest leadership and false media claims, permits him to deflect blame without addressing facts, and even excluding the investigation for the whole topic.

Similarly, Hezbollah also engages in discursive denial through Nasrallah's speech. In the French outlet, Hezbollah is accused of owning explosives in the port, which could have been the catalyst of the Beirut Port Explosion. Nasrallah refutes this by stating, through *L'Orient Le Jour*, "Nous n'avons ni entrepôt d'armes, ni missiles, ni matières explosives dans le port de Beyrouth" (We have no weapons warehouses, no missiles, and no explosives in the port of Beirut) (August 7, 202, p. 1). Through predication, Nasrallah describes Hezbollah as what it is not, denying the ownership and presence of the explosives, setting a tone of wrongful accusations and political victimization. The use of repetition in the headline, as well as loaded words such as "armes," "missiles," and "matière explosives," uses intensification and connotation to reinforce the seriousness of the accusation, along with emphasis on the rejection of involvement. Hansson's

(2022, p. 63) view on indirect cues resonated here, through Nasrallah's shift from the accusations to the reason behind his dissociation. In fragile environments like Lebanon's, such performances further contribute to unjust blame politics.

#### **4.2.2. Discursive Techniques of Shielding & Legal Cover:**

Past direct denial is the attribution of indirect blame through the use of procedural and institutional language. Using this strategy aims to avoid denial through deferring and redistributing blame through the discursive emphasis of legality, constitutionality, and jurisdiction in avoidance of questions of responsibility. Concrete accountability is blurred by displaced procedural and discursive complexities. In the Lebanese context, the use of discursive tools reinforces impunity, as actors rely on constitutional processes to avoid questioning.

Using Hood's (2002, p. 172) agency blame strategy, Aoun deflects and reassigns blame to another group. Responding to an accusation of inaction, Aoun responds in *The Daily Star*

“The first time the president was informed about the ammonium nitrate, a highly explosive material, in hangar 12 of the port was through the General Directorate of the State Security on July 21, 2020," the statement said. According to the statement, Aoun, upon viewing the report, asked his security and military adviser to follow up on it with the secretary-general of the Higher Defense Council, which he did. The secretary-general of the Higher Defense Council informed Aoun's adviser on July 28 that he was dealing with the issue and had sent a letter to the Public Works Ministry about it, which the ministry received on Aug. 3, one day before the blast.” (2020, p.

Procedural narration shields Aoun in this passage, serving as a discursive strategy to contain and distance himself. Procedure serves as a shield, affirming Aoun's innocence and portraying him as a protocol-follower. The focus on the timeline, council discussion, and official letters helps reposition Aoun as an active figure committed to justice. Furthermore, the structural opposition between Aoun's warning to the Public Works Ministry vs. their lack of response in time further serves to reinforce Aoun's self-legitimation and reject the blame onto another institution.

Additionally, procedural discourse also appears in *L'Orient Le Jour* through its coverage of Aoun refusing to dismiss three high-ranking officials arrested in connection to the blast. The

article quotes, “Le président libanais Michel Aoun ne signera pas des décrets visant à démettre de leurs fonctions trois hauts fonctionnaires arrêtés après la double explosion au port de Beyrouth, justifiant lundi sa position par la nécessité d'une décision gouvernementale.” (Lebanese President Michel Aoun will not sign decrees to dismiss three high-ranking officials arrested after the double explosion at the port of Beirut, justifying his position on Monday by the need for a government decision.) (October 5, 2020, p. 1). Aoun’s refusal shows activation through the withholding of the signage, which is then predicated as something that is naturally procedural rather than a politically motivated move. The justification of Aoun’s actions is clearly constructed through the use of topos of legal formality, where bureaucratic language is employed to justify a politically motivated choice. Here, political elites deflect blame instead of solving problems, reflecting Hinterleitner's (2017, p. 234) politicized policy practice. These discursive strategies function here to legitimize inaction while appearing to formally follow the law.

The Daily Star's coverage of the judiciary further exemplifies the pattern of legal discourse as a discursive safeguard. Instead of always functioning as an impartial mechanism of accountability, the judiciary seems to be constructed in a light of compromise and political infiltration. Stated through the outlet

Caretaker Justice Minister Marie-Claude Najm put forward Judge Samer Younes as her nominee to spearhead the probe but the HJC rejected her suggestion. A judicial source told The Daily Star that Younes had been rejected for being too close to Free Patriotic Movement head Gebran Bassil.” (August 12, 2020, p.1).

Here, nomination is a tool for pointing out compromised neutrality, while prediction erodes judicial legitimacy through the closeness to Bassil. This combination mirrors a conflict-essence blame narrative (Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman, 2018, p. 1195) as institutions are constructed as fundamentally defective and sectarian. The structural opposition between a theoretically independent judiciary and the reality of political manipulation, this construction provides a view into the barrier to justice due to sectarian affiliation. In this case, political elites are manipulating the judicial process, further complicating the process of blame construction.

In the same article, “Constitutionally, no one can accuse the president, prime minister, or a member of Parliament ... So we already know that the court will judge only lower- and

middle-ranking public functionaries." (p. 2). By using "constitutionally" explicitly, a topos of legality and authority is introduced, in which legal principles are not just specified but are also activated to excuse the boundaries of accountability. The phrase then functions as discursive appropriation by alluding to constitutional protection first, further protecting political elites from being convicted before the start of the investigation. At the same time, the structural opposition between lower-level accountability versus elite immunity is further highlighted in the text, emphasized by the use of "we already know." There is also a connotative weight that is carried by the phrase, carrying discursive assurance and certainty.

Lastly, in *L'Orient Le Jour*, customs chief Bahri Daher extracts himself from blame distribution by highlighting his role in issuing warnings. "Nous avons alerté la justice à six reprises, entre 2014 et jusqu'à récemment, sur la nécessité de réexporter cette marchandise hors du pays, mais la justice ne nous a pas écoutés." (We alerted the justice system six times, between 2014 and until recently, about the need to re-export this merchandise out of the country, but the justice system didn't listen to us.) (August 5, 2020, pp. 3-4). A combination of activation, topos of legitimate procedure, and passivation is shown here. Daher and his institution are activated as responsible agents who continually attempted to warn about the ammonium nitrate since 2014. Through the repetition of warning six times, the message of due diligence is intensified while also aligning with topos of procedural legitimacy through their active prevention, implying that the disaster would have been avoided. Correspondingly, the judiciary is constructed as passive: "The justice system didn't listen to us." This represents them as inactive, unresponsive, and eventually, guilty for this failure. The further exclusion of judicial actors also blurs direct blame. These media discourses express how procedural precision becomes a discursive device, in this context to obscure responsibility through institutional bureaucracy and political complexity.

#### **4.2.3. International Blame and Narrative Ambiguity**

A final discursive strategy emerges as the extension of blame beyond Lebanon's borders, international blame, and narrative ambiguity. This discourse plays a significant role in the diffusion of responsibility and complication of accountability. In this case, the outsourcing of responsibility to international organizations functions as a discursive attempt to shift or obscure blame. This strategy ambiguously targets foreign actors and institutions through indirect accusations and suspicions. Blame construction remains unsolved in this case due to the discourse's selective and ambiguous nature. This follows Jessop's (2012, p. 5) argument on

narrative struggle for representation, arguing their inherent selectiveness is influenced by political powers.

An evident example of ambiguity emerges in *The Daily Star*. “The United Nations Tuesday rejected claims made by arrested Customs chief Badri Daher that it inspected and cleared the cargo of the ship that delivered nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate to Beirut Port in 2013.” (August 18, 2020, p. 1), then followed by a firm rejection by UNIFIL. Through this example, the involvement of an international organization acts discursively to redirect responsibility away from Lebanese authorities. The topos of legitimacy, in this case UN authorization, is used to discursively shield Daher from accountability, while the predication of UNIFIL’s refutation confirms procedural spacing. As a result, an instance of ambiguity relocates blame away from the Lebanese authorities, even for a moment.

This discourse is further evolved in *L’Orient Le Jour*’s reference to Savaro Ltd., the company associated with the ship delivering the ammonium nitrate to the port of Beirut. The article says, “Le bâtonnier confirme par ailleurs que la compagnie Savaro a été bel et bien mise en examen par le juge Fadi Sawan et que c’était à ce titre que l’ordre des avocats avait présenté sa requête aux autorités britanniques.” (The president of the bar also confirmed that the Savaro company had indeed been indicted by Judge Fadi Sawan and that it was in this capacity that the bar association had submitted its request to the British authorities.) (February 3, 2021, p. 7). This nominates a foreign entity, presenting a factual international link to the catastrophe. Through the activation of the company as an actor under examination, the news outlet initiated a type of blame that is legitimate and international. Through the activation of the company as a possible culprit, an action-based blame was proposed, where responsibility is proposed through legal steps instead of moral condemnation. However, the ambiguity regarding the role of Savaro in the disaster leaves the storyline in a discursive gray space in which international accountability is suggested but not fully followed.

Similarly, the narrative thickens through the reference to popular suspicion. An *L’Orient Le Jour* article stated, “De nombreux témoignages circulent sur les réseaux sociaux selon lesquels des avions de combat, vraisemblablement israéliens, ont survolé la capitale juste avant les deux explosions qui ont dévasté le port de Beyrouth et de nombreux quartiers de la capitale sur des kilomètres à la ronde.” (Numerous accounts are circulating on social networks that fighter jets, probably Israeli, flew over the capital just before the two explosions that devastated

the port of Beirut and many parts of the capital for miles around.) (August 5, 2020, p. 1). Public testimonies are included here, which legitimize collective suspicion into an implicit accusation, especially with the predication and normalization of illegal Israeli military surveillance as a routine aggression. On the other hand, the predication of Israel's denial neutralizes it and paints an image of diplomatic professionalism. Additionally, there is a structural opposition between the memory of citizens and official statements, as well as another between two major actors geopolitically, shown in the same article, "Netanyahu a attribué l'infiltration au Hezbollah" (Netanyahu attributed the infiltration to Hezbollah.) (p. 6). This tension in blame exchange added complexity to the context of the Lebanese port explosion, noting that such discourses can reshape the perceptions of responsibility while still maintaining strategic vagueness.

Another relevant aspect of this discourse is the recurring opposition to an international intervention, especially appointed by President Aoun. His refusal to permit an independent investigation is discursively constructed through the topos of sovereignty, where the legitimacy of Lebanon's local institutions is prioritized over external intervention. "Aoun rejected attempts to internationalize the investigation into the explosion. "There will be no internationalization [of the probe]. If we are unable to govern ourselves, no one can govern us," (The Daily Star. August 7, 2020, p. 2) quotes The Daily Star. This phrase reflects a topos of sovereignty, where responsibility in the explosion is twisted into a matter of patriotic autonomy. Instead of handling the public distrust in the Lebanese state and its institutions, the president transfers the discourse to one of international interference, refuting external involvement as an attack on internal integrity. There is a clear structural opposition in this discourse, Lebanon vs. external actors, or sovereignty vs. foreign reign. Aoun uses narrative inversion, flipping the accusation and recasting foreign intervention as a "waste of time," serving as a displacement of accountability.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore how blame was discursively constructed in Lebanese digital news coverage of the Beirut Port Explosion, focusing on the timeframe between August 2020 and February 2021. With a sample of 40 news articles across two major English and French speaking Lebanese digital outlets, L'Orient Le Jour and The Daily Star, this thesis used a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis method. The combination of rich visual and textual analysis assessed how blame was constructed, deflected, mediated and communicated, as a consequence of the tragic Beirut Port Explosion, being one of the most disastrous non-nuclear explosions in modern history. Instead of simply attributing accountability, blame was constructed in media narratives through conflict-essence construction (Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman, 2018, p. 1195), populist discourses and oppositions (Hameleers et al., 2016), and institutional deflection (Hinterleitner, 2017, p. 234). In contexts where institutional accountability mechanisms are compromised, these findings shift the role of media as simply descriptive reporting to moral and ideological sense-making, allowing blame to become a replacement for justice in fragile states.

Shaped by sectarian polarization and political fragmentation, the Lebanese media landscape was not just a neutral space for reporting, but a site for meaning-making in times of absent institutional accountability. The media became an essential channel in which narratives of injustice and guilt were created and circulated, at a time where judicial processes halted and public trust in government depleted. Within this context, the role of media in blame construction became more than a symbolic tool, but a role of moral reference and political repositioning.

The research employed visual and textual tools for the analysis, from MCDA and DHA (Machin & Mayr, 2012; van Leeuwen, 2008; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016) resulting in two major discourses constructed in texts. Firstly, both outlets strongly constructed the Lebanese state as the primary site of blame. The state was mostly referred to as a single entity, rather than as an individual actor, as an interconnected system of institutional decay, political negligence and deep corruption. The discourse of systemic blame constructed the explosion as a result of political failure, an inevitable consequence of deeply-rooted corruption and mismanagement. Specifically, lexical repetition of words, such as “corrupt,” “negligent”, and predications describing the state as a failure, were used frequently to involve the collective state, without directly attributing blame to a single actor. This first discourse highlighted the structural deterioration and enforced

the idea that reform and system overhaul is necessary for accountability, rather than just penalizing individuals.

Secondly, a discourse of blame deflection and denial was recognized in statements, as an evident strategy for political elites to evade accountability. A combination of discursive ambiguity, strategic silence and bureaucratic processes were identified to construct blame in this context. President Michel Aoun, among other high-ranking political actors, manufactured the disaster in technical and constitutional terms, proposing that international interference or complex investigations were hurdles to justice. Blame was diluted through strategies such as topos of sovereignty and procedural systems, where delay and deflection was justified through argumentations of moral high ground or narratives of inversion, where accusations are flipped and casted to external actors. The inclusion of international actors were heavily analyzed in the text, where local actors were excluded, or passivation in the texts. Although these discourses were present in the media as a reproduction of elite rhetoric, it did not always come from the outlet's own voice, coming off as neutral as a quotation form.

Despite the distinctions between both themes, they occasionally were present within the same news piece. The discursive tension appeared at times in articles starting off with governmental condemnation, only to conclude with official statements in which blame was deflected. This is a reflection of the fragmentation of accountability, where both these realities live in parallel. From this emerges a complex image of media discourses in times of crisis. The media then plays the role of actively moulding public understanding, rather than just mirroring events, in an absence of resolutions from those responsible. This discursive intersection shows the polarized nature of Lebanon's media, in which outlets can circulate contrasting narratives, creating a space for narrative contestation in news media.

Thus, these findings contribute to a large, yet lacking, literature on crisis communication, blame construction and multimodal critical discourse analysis, especially in the Global South. By applying these results to the context of fragile, polarized and recovering countries, the study confirms, extends and challenges existing theoretical assumptions in the field.

These findings refine Hinterleitner (2017)'s framework on strategic blame avoidance. It illustrates that media systems become active agents in performing these strategies, especially within systems characterized with political sectarianism. In the context of Lebanon's political sectarianism, news media can either reproduce elite narratives of denial and ambiguity, but also

offer counter-discourses of demanded accountability through protest. Similarly, Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman's (2018, p. 1203) conflict-essence blame type emerged as a reflection of the systemic blame discourse, linking the explosion to long-standing institutional dysfunction, rather than an isolated event.

Then, the results confirm the fact that the construction of blame is based on the ideological positioning of media outlets. Both *L'Orient Le Jour* and *The Daily Star*, with distinctions in ideological tone, aligned with Simonsen's (2024) study on liberal media tendencies. Affirming her theory, the outlets contributed to the broader strategy of liberal and independent outlets to attribute blame to systemic governmental and institutional failure, rather than singular actors. In cases where accountability mechanisms are slow and fragmented, these results support past statements that opposing or centrist media in polarized spaces are more favorable to emphasize collective failure and structural corruption. Similarly, the results of this study also confirmed Hameleers et al.'s (2016), argument on the role of emotionalized blame discourses, in creating a populist moral divide between elites and victims. The theme tackling the popular discourse within the articles, emerged many structural oppositions, positioning the elite as morally bankrupt, and the people as morally correct.

Moreover, this study supports and contributes to past research, such as Liu et al.'s (2020) typology of crisis narratives and Malle et al.'s (2014) Path Model of Blame. It does so by adapting these theories within non-Western and structurally unstable situations. This study creates nuances in literature that has, in the past, only existed centering on democracies in relatively fair institutions. The expectations in this context of blame construction, can be of the formation of accountability or resolutions. Thus, the study demonstrates how in countries with failed states, like Lebanon, the point of blame construction is conducted to perform moral judgement, rather than creating reform. Within the theme of Systemic Blame, the state is placed as a moral perpetrator, which fits into the blame narrative of Liu et al. Accordingly, the victim and moral outcry (popular discourse) section, aligns with the victim type, in which "the people" use their suffering to construct accusations of injustice.

On a similar note, the involvement of emotional narratives within the media, shows an example of how the media constructed emotionally heavy stories for a purpose. These narratives are not just reported, but they are constructed in a way to guide public sentiment and assign moral weight. This extends Shen et al.'s (2014) emphasis, that narratives in news media have

more than just an informative role, but one to emotionally involve audiences, serving as a social, moral, political actors that constructs moral structures and collective memory of crises.

This study contributes to the literature surrounding topics of media studies, crisis communication and discourse analysis, specifically within the context of polarized and fragile states in the Global South. To elucidate, much prior research on blame construction, such as by Simonsen (2024), Vasilopoulou et al. (2013), have focused on democratic systems in Western countries, with functioning institutional and legal systems. In comparison, this study shows how in Lebanon's dysfunctional environment, blame narratives play a different and extended political role. At times, these narratives compensate for the absence of justice, rather than simply attributing blame, while also serving as a space to express collective mourning, and build diverse stories for accountability through the media.

Beyond its theoretical implications and contributions, this study carries valuable practical implications for media actors, journalists, and humanitarian actors working in polarized states. There is a need for more reflective practices in media production, as the results of this study have underscored its importance in shaping societal perceptions, especially in case of crisis situations, where institutions are absent or illegitimate. The critical role of media is highlighted in this study, emerging as a channel for information and a site for moral judgement, especially in cases of institutional paralysis. Understanding the discursive construction of blame allows editors and journalists to be more reflexive and ethically aware in reporting. As for NGOs and justice organizations, these findings underscore the role of media as an informal space for accountability, essential for exposing institutional failure and highlighting marginalized voices. This study could help training programs in crisis communication, or attend advocacy efforts that depend on the media to construct a push for accountability.

Though this study proposes a comprehensive and critical analysis of blame construction in Lebanese digital media, post-disaster, it carries several limitations. Firstly, the chosen news outlets are French and English- language outlets, limiting capturing a full understanding of media constructions. Although the outlets are popular and influential, they may not fully capture the discursive strategies found in Arabic-language media, which is the first spoken language in Lebanon. This is especially true for outlets that carry pro-government or pro-Hezbollah narratives. The inclusion of a broader range of articles in the future could improve the ideological representation of mediated discourses in Lebanon.

The confinement of data criteria within six months, might affect the longer lasting discourses in the media. Although the dataset of 40 articles permitted an extensive analysis of the immediate aftermath of the explosion, it could miss the discourses of blame which evolve according to further legal developments and political shifts. In the future, a longitudinal approach could offer richer insights to how discourse of accountability changes or resists over time.

Furthermore, an interesting dimension to explore with the topic of constructing discourse, could be audience reception research. Beyond visual and textual analysis of media content, exploring how audiences interpret, accept, or reject media narratives could yield valuable insights.

Moreover, the analytical lens of the study's interpretative process was shaped by myself, as a person of Lebanese origin. Potential bias is possible when positionality is involved in research, though it often yields cultural insights. To avoid bias, I aimed for reflexivity and transparency throughout the process, But for future studies, collaborative or cross-cultural analysis could add critical distance to the study.

Future studies can further examine the role of social media platforms, which also played a significant role post-blast. Elements of social media could add more important layers to blame discourse, especially when other media spaces are affiliated.

Finally, although this study presents valuable insights to comprehend how blame is discursively constructed in fragile states, there is still room for further investigative research.

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## 7. Appendix A (Codebook)

Framework/Author	Tool	Definition
Machin & Mayr (2012)	Connotation	Use of words/phrases that imply feelings or beliefs beyond their literal meaning.
Machin & Mayr (2012)	Structural Opposition	Binary constructions used to simplify complex issues and highlight oppositions.
Machin & Mayr (2012)	Lexical Choices	Choice of words to assign, divert, or reinforce blame narratives.
Reisigl & Wodak (2009)	Nomination	How actors are named or labeled in discourse (e.g., official titles, general terms).
Reisigl & Wodak (2009)	Predication	The qualities or attributes assigned to actors (positive, negative, neutral).
Reisigl & Wodak (2009)	Argumentation (Topoi)	Use of logical reasoning to justify blame or exoneration (e.g., cause-effect).
Reisigl & Wodak (2009)	Intensification / Mitigation	Degree to which responsibility is emphasized or downplayed through language.
Reisigl & Wodak (2009)	Suppression	Omission of specific actors or voices in the narrative.
van Leeuwen (2008)	Inclusion / Exclusion	Whether actors are present or absent in the discourse, influencing visibility.
van Leeuwen (2008)	Activation / Passivation	Whether actors are shown as active agents or passive recipients.
Ledin & Machin (2018)	Representation of Social Actors (Visual)	How individuals or groups are visually depicted (e.g., portrait, group shot).

Ledin & Machin (2018)	Actions and Indexical Links	Body language, gestures, and expressions that imply action or emotion.
Ledin & Machin (2018)	Gaze and Angle	Viewer positioning and perceived power through eye contact and perspective.
Ledin & Machin (2018)	Color	Emotional tone or mood conveyed through color saturation or schemes.
Ledin & Machin (2018)	Setting and Context	Background details and setting that frame the interpretation of the scene.

## 8. Appendix B (List of used articles)

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, October 22). *Explosion du port: 25 détenus et d'innombrables questions.*

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1247989/explosion-du-port-25-detenus-et-dinnombrables-questions.html>

The Daily Star. (2020, August 17). *Customs chief Daher arrested in blast probe.* LexisNexis.

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L'Orient-Le Jour. (2021, February 3). *Au service d'une cause nationale, le barreau de Beyrouth gère 1 400 plaintes individuelles.*

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1250706/au-service-dune-cause-nationale-le-barreau-de-beyrouth-gere-1-400-plaintes-individuelles.html>

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, October 5). *Aoun refuse de destituer les trois responsables arrêtés dans le cadre de l'enquête.*

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1235208/aoun-refuse-de-destituer-les-trois-responsables-arretes-dans-le-cadre-de-lenquete.html>

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, October 2). *L'assassinat d'un colonel des Douanes à la retraite soulève de nouvelles questions.*

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1243531/l-assassinat-dun-colonel-des-douanes-a-la-retraite-souleve-de-nouvelles-questions.html>

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, December 6). *Raï: Plus l'enquête tarde, plus les suspicions augmentent.*

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1243743/rai-plus-lenquete-tarde-plus-les-suspicions-augmentent.html>

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, December 20). *Raï dit craindre la mort de l'enquête si elle est déférée devant le Parlement.*

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1245531/rai-dit-craindre-la-mort-de-lenquete-si-elle-est-deferee-devant-le-parlement.html>

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, August 5). *Selon de nombreux témoignages, des avions ont été entendus avant l'explosion, mais Israël dément toute implication.*

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1228303/selon-de-nombreux-temoignages-des-avions-ont-ete-entendus-avant-lexplosion-mais-israel-dement-toute-implication.html>

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, August 7). *Nasrallah: "Nous n'avons ni entrepôt d'armes, ni missiles, ni matières explosives dans le port de Beyrouth"*.

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1228619/nasrallah-nous-navons-ni-entrepot-darmes-ni-missiles-ni-matieres-explosives-dans-le-port-de-beyrouth.html>

The Daily Star. (2020, October 18). *Thousands mark uprising anniversary in Beirut.* LexisNexis.

<https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=082519ea-fa6b-44db-8a88-646f3d00fd2f&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A613D-1941-F11P-X3JT-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=335154>

The Daily Star. (2020, December 14). *Hariri's Future bloc launches scathing attack on Aoun.* LexisNexis.

<https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=8611f6a9-b222-4f04-8538-b75a7fd5d063&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A61HH-VYY1-F11P-X081-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=335154>

The Daily Star. (2020, December 13). *Aoun did not meddle in blast probe: Statement.* LexisNexis.

<https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=98ac6ab0-e680-4702-b64b-a25fd5c1a863&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A61H9-WR41-JDJN-62RD-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=335154>

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, October 11). *Rai dit craindre la mort de l'enquête si elle est déferée devant le Parlement.*

<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1245531/rai-dit-craindre-la-mort-de-lenquete-si-elle-est-deferee-devant-le-parlement.html>

The Daily Star. (2020, September 13). *Rai calls for UN to impose international investigation into Beirut blast.* LexisNexis.

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L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, December 3). *L'assassinat d'un colonel des Douanes à la retraite soulève de nouvelles questions.*

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The Daily Star. (2021, January 6). *Rai waiting for Hariri's return to resume Cabinet mediation bid.* LexisNexis.

<https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=942d000e-30d7-4d84-a6a7-e4bc2d766f8a&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A61PF-VS61-F11P-X555-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=335154>

L'Orient-Le Jour. (2020, October 5). *Aoun refuse de destituer les trois responsables arrêtés dans le cadre de l'enquête.*

<https://www.orientlejour.com/article/1235208/aoun-refuse-de-destituer-les-trois-responsables-arretes-dans-le-cadre-de-lenquete.html>

The Daily Star. (2020, August 12). *Political wrangling clouds Beirut blast probe.* LexisNexis.

<https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=9aaec90b-dd7b-4339-b908-64c69f3dd028&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A60MH-TCK1-F11P-X1WB-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=335154>

The Daily Star. (2020, August 18). *UN denies responsibility for entry of explosives to Beirut.* LexisNexis.

<https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=c0f17aa1-4e29-4049-b6fc-1d11932eea8a&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A60MC-T3S1-F11P-X28Y-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=335154>

The Daily Star. (2020, August 7). *Aoun opposes international probe into Beirut explosion.* LexisNexis.

<https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=2ab6dadd-1837-40bd-af70-1d928e14f8e2&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A60J2-40G1-F11P-X1BG-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=335154>