

(De)Legitimation of Restrictive Abortion in The Star Online and Malaysiakini:
A Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis
(Legitimasi dan Penafian Legitimasi Sekatan Pengguguran dalam The Star Online dan Malaysiakini:
Analisis Wacana Kritis Perbandingan)

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ABSTRACT

The news media operates not only as a channel of information but also as a persuasive force that shapes and (de)legitimises values, ideologies and social norms. Although Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has traditionally focused on hard news to uncover media ideologies, the role of soft news in reflecting the perspectives of targeted social groups remains underexamined especially in taboo areas such as restrictive abortion. This study employs Van Leeuwen and Reyes' legitimisation strategies to comparatively analyse soft news articles from The Star Online and Malaysiakini on restrictive abortion in Malaysia. Sixteen articles were analysed to identify (de)legitimation strategies that discursively construct ideological positions. The findings reveal that both The Star Online and Malaysiakini employed overlapping discursive strategies in (de)legitimising restrictive abortion. Despite their differing editorial orientations, both outlets tactically legitimise progressive actors and actions such as reformist groups, reproductive education and compassionate healthcare through appeals to expert authority, rationalisation and altruism. Conversely, they de-legitimise restrictive conservatism and punitive measures often using emotional framing, hypothetical future and moral evaluation. The analysis also identifies two dominant social groups: 1. Social group in support of de-legitimation 2. Social group in support of legitimisation exerting discursive power to maintain or challenge the status quo. Challenging the assumption that mainstream media is politically driven while independent media is civic-centric, this study reveals converging rhetorical strategies and ideological overlaps across both outlets, underscoring the media's mediating role in contested reproductive discourse. It demonstrates that while abortion is increasingly articulated in international discourse as a human right, the global framework remains polarised with significant variation across local contexts at both macro and micro levels.

Keywords: abortion; women's rights; Critical Discourse Analysis; legitimisation strategies; Van Leeuwen; Reyes

ABSTRAK

Berita di media bukan sahaja berfungsi sebagai saluran maklumat; malah ianya berfungsi sebagai kuasa mempengaruhi yang membentuk serta mengesahkan legitimasi atau menafikan legitimasi nilai, ideologi, dan norma sosial. Walaupun Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) secara tradisinya banyak memberi tumpuan kepada berita berat (hard news) untuk menyingkap ideologi media, peranan berita ringan (soft news) dalam mencerminkan perspektif kumpulan sosial sasaran masih kurang dikaji, terutamanya dalam topik sensitif seperti isu sekatan pengguguran kandungan. Kajian ini menggunakan strategi legitimasi Van Leeuwen dan Reyes untuk menganalisis secara perbandingan artikel berita ringan daripada The Star Online dan Malaysiakini mengenai sekatan pengguguran kandungan di Malaysia. Sebanyak enam belas artikel dianalisis bagi mengenal pasti strategi legitimasi dan penafian legitimasi yang membina kedudukan ideologi melalui wacana. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua The Star Online dan Malaysiakini menggunakan strategi wacana yang bertindih dalam memberikan atau menafikan legitimasi terhadap sekatan pengguguran kandungan. Walaupun mempunyai orientasi editorial yang berbeza, kedua-dua saluran media tersebut secara taktikal memberikan legitimasi kepada pihak dan tindakan progresif—seperti kumpulan reformis, pendidikan reproduktif, dan penjagaan kesihatan yang berasaskan belas ihsan—melalui rujukan kepada autoriti

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pakar, rasionalisasi, dan altruisme. Sebaliknya, mereka menafikan legitimasi terhadap konservatisme yang menyekat kebebasan serta langkah-langkah bersifat menghukum, sering kali menggunakan pembungkaman emosi, senario masa depan hipotesis, dan penilaian moral. Analisis ini juga mengenal pasti dua kumpulan sosial yang dominan: 1. Kumpulan sosial yang menyokong penafian legitimasi, dan 2. Kumpulan sosial yang menyokong legitimasi; kedua-duanya menggunakan kuasa wacana untuk mengekalkan atau mencabar status quo. Dengan mencabar anggapan bahawa media arus perdana didorong oleh kepentingan politik manakala media bebas lebih berorientasikan masyarakat sivil, kajian ini mendedahkan penumpuan strategi retorik dan pertindihan ideologi antara kedua-dua saluran media tersebut, sekali gus menyerlahkan peranan media sebagai perantara dalam wacana reproduktif yang penuh dengan perdebatan. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa walaupun pengguguran kandungan semakin diungkapkan dalam wacana antarabangsa sebagai satu hak asasi manusia, kerangka global mengenainya kekal terpolarisasi dengan variasi ketara merentas konteks tempatan pada kedua-dua peringkat makro dan mikro.

Kata Kunci: pengguguran kandungan; hak Wanita; Analisis Wacana Kritis; strategi legitimasi; Van Leeuwen; Reyes

INTRODUCTION

Media has over the years been acknowledged as key “source of beliefs and values” through which people understand their social reality (Tator et al., 1998, p. 31). This means that it can potentially affect the subjectivity in relation to the world and the issues concerning it including people’s view in relation to societal norms, institutions and contested issues. Media discourse does not merely reflect reality but instead it actively constructs it by selecting, framing and circulating particular narratives, ideologies and representations. As such, media discourse contributes not only to the public understanding of specific matters but also to the formation of subjectivities and how individuals position themselves ethically, politically and socially in relation to the issue.

Language employed in news does not necessarily convey information of events but rather shapes thoughts and perceptions of readers through shared knowledge, interest and social practices. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), legitimacy constructing and contesting can be done in news media through manipulation of language. In promoting role and moderating discourses by either validating or limiting particular ideas and concepts, language is key (Vaara & Monin, 2010). For (de)legitimation, one bad other negative face can be presented implicitly or explicitly with the intention of putting them against the good other or to turn the reader against the “projected evil” (Chovanec, 2010: p. 62). Habermas (1976) emphasised Max Weber’s thoughts on legitimising authority (like news media) that can potentially lead one to the connection between belief in the legitimacy of orders and their potential for justification on the one hand and to the factual validity on the other (p. 97). With that emphasis, it was concluded that legitimacy occurs when facts and norms converge and consolidate (Steffek, 2003). Considering how media representation influences legitimization (Pollock & Rindova, 2003), it is crucial to understand the discursive practices within which ideologies are situated for instance, how news coverage of political protests or gender rights movements frames certain actors as legitimate or illegitimate (Hossain et. Al., 2026; Hikmatullah et al., 2026) thereby shaping reality and propagating (de)legitimation. Based on the claims, it can be presumed that an objective version of reality is implausible and that (de)legitimation is constructively occurring in parallel to context, situation and temporalities they are embedded in. The discourse surrounding abortion exemplifies this notion: while globally framed as a human right, its local articulation is continually refracted through the lenses of politics, law, religion and socio-cultural norm (Mayall et al., 2025).

Although abortion is recognised globally as a fundamental human right, public discussion remains limited due to entrenched sensitivities and societal stigma (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The United Nations (2020) reports over 25 million unsafe abortions annually, with 7.9% resulting

in maternal deaths, disproportionately affecting impoverished and marginalised women (Information Series on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, 2020). While more than 50 countries permit abortion under specific circumstances such as risk to life, rape, or foetal abnormality (Times, 2020), stigma continues to restrict access to safe and respectful care, posing serious health risks (WHO, 2021). In Malaysia, abortion is legally permitted only when a woman's life is endangered (Penal Code Act 574, Section 312), excluding cases of rape, incest, or unwanted pregnancies (Puvanesvaran, 2020). This restrictive framework has led to tragic outcomes, including infanticide and criminalisation of women, as seen in the 2014 case of a Nepalese migrant worker (Code Blue, 2021). Between 2020 and 2023, 256 infanticide cases were reported, while 100,000 women sought abortion services annually (Bernama, 2023; Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance Malaysia, 2023). Further constraints, such as Terengganu's 2022 Shariah amendment criminalising out-of-wedlock pregnancies, have weakened protections for women (Code Blue, 2022). Despite the urgency of addressing reproductive health, media coverage remains limited (Tiew et al., 2025; Azlan et al., 2026) shaped by socio-cultural sensitivities and a reluctance to engage openly with women's rights, perpetuating the marginalisation of abortion in Malaysian discourse.

Abortion remains one of the most polarizing and ideologically challenging issues in contemporary public discourse. Globally, debates surrounding abortion are rarely confined to medical or legal domains but rather intersect with broader socio-cultural, religious and political narratives that shape how reproductive rights are understood, contested and governed. On a macro dimension, (de)legitimation of abortion discourse is a reflection of deeply-seated tensions between individual autonomy and collective morality, secular governance and religious doctrine, public health imperatives and cultural taboos (Adamczyk, 2022; Bloomer et al, 2018). These tensions are discursively negotiated through various institutional channels including law, religion, education and media with each contributing to the construction of competing versions of legitimacy and social reality. At the micro level on the other hand, (de)legitimation operates through every day discursive practices enacted by institutions, individuals and mediated publics. These micro-dimensions are not limited to linguistic features alone but encompass the situated ways in which legitimacy is constructed, negotiated and contested within specific socio-cultural contexts that subtly reinforces or challenges knowledge taken for granted or normalised practices. The concept of *Asian abortion discourse* (Nie, 2005; Cook; Adibah, 2024) captures region-specific narratives that diverge from the Western "pro-choice" versus "pro-life" dichotomy. Rather than centring on ideological confrontation, these discourses reveal a nuanced interplay of state authority, religious morality, cultural silence and communal values. In Malaysia, for example, abortion debates are mediated through social negotiation and moral pragmatism, reflecting institutional framing that prioritises social harmony over individual autonomy. Scholars such as Nie (2005) and Cook et al. (2015) demonstrate how Asian contexts including China, Japan and Malaysia which embed abortion within moral and cultural frameworks that normalise pragmatic rather than polarised approaches to reproductive rights. This perspective underscores how abortion discourse in Asia operates less as a site of moral conflict and more as a reflection of negotiated legitimacy within socio-cultural and institutional boundaries (Nie, 2005; Cook et al., 2015; Adibah, 2024).

Studies in the past have looked at micro-legitimation strategies using Van Leeuwen's theoretical framework (O'Donovan et al., 2021; Heinola, 2021; Yoong, 2023). The studies revealed various use of (de)legitimation strategies and identified limitation that indicated the need for adaption that accounts for local cultural and political context. Therefore, analysing news articles from both mainstream and independent media provides insight into how ideological views on

abortion are constructed and contested within Malaysia's socio-political and cultural context. Studying the (de)legitimation strategies in these texts reveals how media reflect or challenge dominant narratives, shaping public perception and policy debates. Scholarship on Malaysian abortion discourse has largely concentrated on legal, religious and health perspectives (Low et al., 2015; Tiew et al., 2025), leaving linguistic legitimization strategies underexplored. This neglect reflects the dominance of legal and biomedical frameworks in reproductive rights scholarship which has overshadowed discourse-based approaches. Extending existing work, this study applies Van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) and Reyes's (2011) frameworks to analyse how Malaysian mainstream and independent media discursively (de)legitimise restrictive abortion. It embeds Malaysia's multicultural dynamics and Islamic moral governance into a context-sensitive discourse analysis (Maznah, 2018; Liow, 2019; Adibah, 2024). Following Malaysia's 2022 general election and the formation of a unity government, shifting coalitions have recalibrated moral authority and policy priorities (Weiss, 2023; Dettman & Pepinsky, 2024). These political changes make it timely to examine how legitimacy is linguistically achieved in abortion discourse. Recognising that legitimization strategies often overlap due to shared semantic structures, the study draws on both Van Leeuwen's and Reyes's models to ensure a comprehensive and robust analysis. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What discursive strategies are employed by *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* in (de)legitimising restrictive abortion and how do they converge and diverge?
2. How do the (de)legitimation strategies derived from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* reflect the hidden ideologies in (de)legitimising restrictive abortion?

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON ABORTION DISCOURSE

Media has played a decisive role in shaping how abortion is represented and understood, both in traditional outlets such as television and in online spaces (Conti & Cahill, 2017). Talbot (2013) argues that media discourse is central to the construction of social realities, often framing debates on abortion through myths, religious beliefs and political agendas rather than factual claims. While Baxter & Angouri (2021) highlight how patriarchal structures shapes Western media narrative, Sharma et al. (2017) demonstrate similar gendered prejudice in Asian contents. Taken together, these studies reveal that abortion discourse is consistently framed through gendered bias yet differ in the cultural mechanism that sustain the bias. This suggest that local socio-cultural norms, not just global patriarchal structures play a decisive role in shaping legitimacy. Consequently, female sexuality is subjected to cultural expectations (Ouahid et al., 2025; Willis, 2008) with abortion positioned as a challenge to established norms (Kravaritou & Sheldon, 1994; Bracke, 2017). While the UN frames abortion as a human right, media narratives often reinforce existing social orders, prioritising political agendas over women's emancipation or community-centred concerns. Despite global efforts to reduce stigma and legitimise abortion, local newspapers across diverse contexts frequently employ language that undermines legitimacy and amplifies biased ideologies (McLeod & Feltham-King, 2012; Goc, 2017). This aligns with Goatly and Hiradhar's (2016) claim that language is never neutral; it shapes reality by highlighting or concealing information, often reinforcing the status quo and protecting dominant social interests.

Other studies highlight how media discourse contributes to the denigration and criminalisation of women, producing biased social realities and discriminatory practices (Londras et al., 2022). Western scholarship, employing content, thematic and textual analysis, demonstrates that pro-life and pro-choice debates reinforce power relations, ideological control and conventional feminine roles (Foucault, 1978; Lazzarato, 2002; Freeman, 2023; Prendegast, 2023). These analyses link abortion discourse to socio-cultural, economic and political interests rather than to women's liberation or reproductive rights (Basu & Tripathi, 2023; Sharma et al., 2024). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Discourse Analysis (DA) have largely focused on abortion in news reporting, legal frameworks and campaigns, with limited attention to soft news. By analysing soft news which is personality-centred (emphasising individual experiences and emotions) and incident-based (framing issues through specific events or cases) (Reinemann et al., 2011), the study foregrounds media's dual role: as a platform for public expression and as a discursive gatekeeper that regulates which voices and ideologies gain visibility. This approach allows for a context-sensitive exploration of how (de)legitimation occurs not only through the representation of public actors but also through the media's own framing strategies, lexical choices and interdiscursive alignments. Despite extensive scholarships on abortion in Malaysia from public health and religious perspectives as well as legal scholarship (Low et al., 2015; Ansari, 2020; Allothey et al., 2021), no study has systematically analysed how mainstream and independent online newspapers discursively (de)legitimise restrictive abortion in soft news. This gap is likely due to limited reporting, political sensitivities and socio-cultural constraints but is significant because it offers unique insights into how ideologies are subtly reinforced or contested. These factors underscore the need for CDA to uncover the ideologies that either restrain or promote abortion within Malaysia's unique socio-cultural and political context.

LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES

According to Van Leeuwen (2007), whenever a speaker/actor tries to justify their act within a social practice, it is called the act of legitimation and is found plentiful in everyday communications. Legitimation refers to the rhetorical methods individuals use in communication to justify their beliefs and actions within a given ideological framework (Reyes, 2011, p. 788).

Van Leeuwen's Legitimation Strategies (2008; 2010):

1. Authorization - Legitimacy is derived from authority figures, tradition, law, or institutional power.
2. Moral Evaluation - Actions are legitimised by reference to value systems, ethics, or societal norms.
3. Rationalization - Justification is based on logic, utility, or technical reasoning.
4. Mythopoesis (Narrativization) - Legitimacy is conveyed through stories, myths, or cautionary tales that reward compliance and punish deviation.

Reyes' Legitimation Strategies (2011):

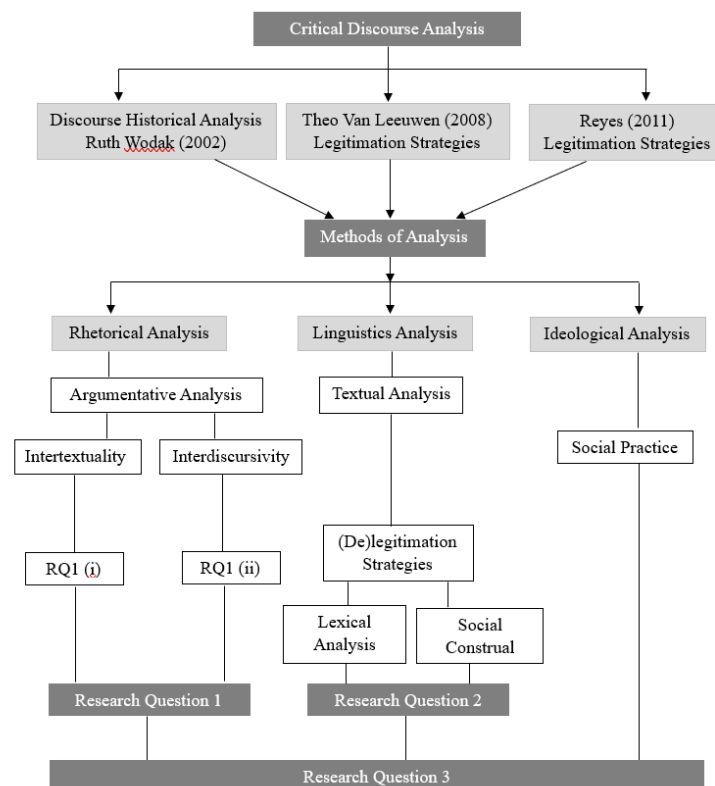
1. Appeal to Emotions - Using fear, hope, or pride to justify decisions.
2. Claiming Rationality - Presenting decisions as logical, inevitable, or technically necessary.

3. Appeal to Hypothetical Futures - Justifying present actions by projecting possible future scenarios.
4. Altruism - Linking policies to shared identity, traditions, or patriotism
5. Resorting to Voices of Authorities - Referencing authority figures, institutions, or laws to validate decisions.

Considering the overlap in strategies between structural and rhetorical strategies of legitimation, this study will employ all five strategies proposed by Van Leeuwen and selected three of Reyes' which are appeal to emotions, appeal to hypothetical future and altruism. With media discourse understood as a sociocultural practice (van Dijk, 1988b), it crucial to examine the (de)legitimation strategies through which realities are shaped (de)legitimised. Van Leeuwen's (2007; 2008) framework provides the structural and institutional forms of legitimation and how strategies like authority, tradition and rationalisation sustain dominant norms. Reyes (2011) by contrast focuses on the rhetorical and linguistic mechanisms of legitimations such as how emotions, hypothetical futures and altruism persuade audiences in every day discourses. Because abortion discourse in Malaysia is simultaneously shaped by macro-level structures and micro-level rhetorical appeals, integrating both frameworks ensure that the analysis does not privilege one dimension over the other. If the study relied solely on Van Leeuwen, it would risk reducing legitimacy to abstract institutional power; if it relied only on Reyes, it would risk overlooking the structural forces that shape discourse. This dual lens allows the study to reveal how legitimacy is both institutionally anchored and linguistically negotiated in media texts.

The study employed the conceptual framework as follows:

DIAGRAM 1. Conceptual Framework of Study



METHOD

Given media's role in mediating realities, this study uses CDA to qualitatively compare argumentative structures on restrictive abortion in Malaysian mainstream and independent online news. The CDA framework was designed to include two distinct levels: The micro-level ((de)legitimation) analysis and ideological analysis as proposed by Van Leeuwen (2008; 2010) and Reyes (2011). Parallel to purposive sampling strategy, a set of predetermined criteria were utilised in identifying the study's sample selection process. This study selected online newspapers as opposed to printed newspapers due to its real-time reporting (Nazarova, 2023), easy accessibility (Wall et al., 2005), increased readers' preferences (Newman et al., 2022) and interactivity (Dudeney, 2000). Two English-medium newspapers, *The Star Online* (mainstream) and *Malaysiakini* (independent) were selected for their leading readership brand scores and audience retention in Malaysia (Newman et al., 2023). Audience retention serves as a methodological justification that validates the platform as the preferred choice among audience thus making them influential platforms for shaping public perception and the more appropriate source for discursive analysis.

TABLE 1. Visitor's Statistics and Audience Retention of Newspaper

Newspaper	Monthly Visitors' Statistics (mil)*	Monthly Unique Visitors' Statistics (mil)**	Audience Retention (minutes)
Malaysiakini	46.32	15.44	00:04:24
The Star Online	50.12	16.70	00:03:28
News Straits Times	22.54	7.514	00:01:55
Free Malaysia Today	27.12	9.041	00:02:38
The Malay Mail	21.19	7.06	00:07:18
The Sun Daily	3.647	1.215	00:01:53
The Edge	4.073	1.357	00:02:03

*Source: Analytics (as of end-December 2022) derived from www.similarweb.com

**Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 (October – December)

Soft news was chosen for its distinct editorial goals and audience focus (Patterson, 2000) which foregrounds human interest and incident-based narratives, further aligning with the study's aim to uncover hidden ideologies shaping perceptions. As a lighter, interest-driven genre, it offers an ideal lens for examining media's disposition on sensitive topics. *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* online portal were used as the primary databases in retrieving samples, using specific narrowed-down keywords (*abortion Malaysia, female rights Malaysia, women's rights Malaysia, sexual and reproductive health Malaysia*) and from a broader topic-related keywords (*illegal abortion pill Malaysia, illegal abortion Malaysia, unwanted pregnancies, pregnancy termination Malaysia, teenage pregnancy Malaysia, sex education Malaysia*). The keywords were selected to balance precision and breadth. Narrowed-down terms directly target discourse on abortion and gender rights, ensuring relevance to the study's core focus. Broader topic-related terms capture indirect framings and euphemisms commonly used in Malaysian media due to socio-cultural sensitivities. This dual approach ensures that the corpus reflects both explicit and implicit representations of abortion discourse, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of (de)legitimation strategies across mainstream and independent outlets. Given the limited coverage of restrictive abortion, articles mentioning "abortion" from January - December 2022 were selected. This is not arbitrary but rather coincides with two highly-publicised incidents which were the case of a

newborn murder case involving an underaged rape victim and Terengganu's Section 29A amendment. Both incidents intensified the public debate of female sexual and reproductive health. By situating the sample within the period of heightened discourse, the study captures how media outlets framed abortion in relation to contemporaneous socio-legal controversies which further strengthens analytical reference and contextual depth (Adibah, 2024). The study was carried out on June 2023. The study also provided current insights on journalistic practices of selected newspapers.

Flick (2006) suggested sampling based on relevance rather than representativeness (p. 121). The inclusion criteria require news articles responding to restrictive abortion and related issues. News articles covering the same events or issues in both online newspapers were included to capture potential distinctions in editorial stances and ideologies (Fowler, 1991). Global agencies were excluded to focus on Malaysian coverage, reflecting local editorial, socio-cultural and political contexts. Using purposive sampling, a total of 18 articles were initially identified; 10 from *The Star Online* and 8 from *Malaysiakini* based on the specified keywords. From this population, a final sample of 16 articles was selected, comprising 8 from each outlet. The relatively small number of articles reflects the fact that abortion is not openly or widely discussed in Malaysia, resulting in limited media coverage. Moreover, the publication dates of these articles coincide with a crucial period of legal and political change, particularly amendments to Syariah law, which heightened public and media attention on reproductive rights. The choice of purposive sampling is therefore justified not only by resource constraints but also by the rarity and sensitivity of the topic. Patton (2002) and Creswell (2015) recommend selecting information-rich sites, a method suited to limited resources and rare, sensitive topics, making it appropriate for examining abortion discourse in Malaysian media. Qualitative analysis aims to explore or explain smaller groups rather than generalise (Dawson, 2019) where 10-12 samples are considered sufficient for saturation and reliable analysis (Guest et al., 2006). Fusch and Ness (2015) warn that failing to reach saturation undermines research quality, while Morse (2015) calls saturation the key guarantee of qualitative rigor. To ensure manageable samples and credible comparison, every second article from both datasets was included. Articles were coded using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach: *The Star Online* labelled "S1" to "S8," *Malaysiakini* were labelled "M1" to "M8". The news articles were grouped into categories based on the broad focus of the news articles namely *sexual and reproductive health, social issues, policy and law making and female rights*.

TABLE 2. The categories of the selected news articles from *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*

Themes	News Articles	Justification
Sexual and reproductive health	S1, S4, M1, M4	Projects the importance of awareness in sexual and reproductive health in avoiding unwanted pregnancies and termination of pregnancies
Social issues	S5, M3	Discusses social issues arising from abortion law
Policy and law making	S6, S7, S8, M5, M6, M7,	Reflects the issues stemming from abortion law
Female rights	S4, S7, M2, M8	Emphasises rights and equality

Initial legitimization categories were drawn from Van Leeuwen's (2008; 2010) framework (authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, mythopoesis) and Reyes' (2011) strategies (appeals to emotions, hypothetical futures and altruism). These categories were then refined through iterative reading of the articles. Each text was analysed for discursive markers that signalled attempts to legitimise or de-legitimise abortion. For example, a statement from a religious authority such as "abortion is a sin" was coded under *authorization* (appeal to religious authority)

and *moral evaluation* (reference to ethical values). A politician's claim that "restrictive laws protect society" was coded as *rationalization* (utility) and *altruism* (national values). Similarly, references to potential consequences such as "if abortion is allowed, social decay will follow" were coded under *hypothetical futures*. Coding was conducted manually, with memos tracking emerging legitimization patterns and overlaps between Van Leeuwen's institutional strategies and Reyes' rhetorical devices. This dual framework ensured that both macro-level structures and micro-level linguistic enactments of legitimacy were systematically captured and analysed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study which aimed to examine the legitimization strategies used in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* in (de)legitimising restrictive abortion resulted in the findings below. Table 3 underlines the similarities of (de)legitimation strategies employed in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* as proposed by Van Leeuwen (2008; 2010) and Reyes (2011).

TABLE 3. Similarities of (De)legitimation Strategies Employed in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*

Strategies Van Leeuwen's Legitimation Strategies	Legitimation of	De-legitimation of
Authority – Expert	Reformist groups advocating changes in sexual and reproductive laws Implementation of reproductive education for teens Use of contraceptives and alternative solutions Compassionate, tactical approaches Efforts to shift socio-cultural norms	Government actors enforcing restrictive abortion policies Denial of access to sexual and reproductive health and knowledge Restriction to contraceptive access Punitive measures targeting women and girls Preservation of outdated socio-cultural norms
Authority – Impersonal	Institutional support for progressive social change	Endorsement of status quo and systemic inertia
Authority – Personal	Statements by individual medical professionals, activists or women sharing lived experiences to support reform Personal narratives that highlight the emotional, physical and socio-economic impact of unwanted pregnancies Testimonies that advocate for autonomy, compassion and rights-based healthcare	Statements by political leaders or religious figures used to justify restrictive abortion laws Personal opinions that moralise abortion without empirical or experiential grounding Rhetoric that reinforces stigma, shame or punitive framing through individual moral authority
Authority – Tradition	Female-centric cultural practices and reproductive health normalisation	Patriarchal traditions and de-normalisation of reproductive discourse
Authority – Conformity	Practices that aligned with gender equity and sustainability	Practices reinforcing patriarchal conformity and limiting progress
Authority – Role Model	Social actors embodying responsibility and progressive values	Social actors neglecting duties and perpetuating harm
Rationalisation – Instrumental	Micro/macro-level efforts enhancing social, political and communal wellbeing	Efforts preserving outdated structures and approaches while limiting societal progress
Rationalisation – Theoretical	Morally accepted practices improving wellbeing	Practices deemed immoral and harmful
Moral Evaluation	Values promoting advancement for females	Values restricting female autonomy and progress
Reyes' Legitimation Strategies		
Appeal to Emotions	Empathetic framing of women's experiences	Punitive or negative emotional framing by authorities
Hypothetical Future	Projected progress and empowerment for women	Suppression of future possibilities through restrictive narratives
Altruism	Advocacy for rights, equality and comprehensive reproductive healthcare	Opposition to rights, equality and reproductive autonomy

The comparative synthesis in Table 3 reveals a striking convergence in the (de)legitimation strategies employed by *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*, despite their differing editorial orientations. Both outlets tactically legitimise actors and actions that advocate for progressive change in sexual and reproductive health policy particularly those promoting education, access to contraceptives and compassionate approaches to unintended and adolescent pregnancies. Through expert authority, instrumental rationalisation and altruism, both media agencies construct affirmative narratives around female empowerment, rights-based healthcare and socio-cultural transformation. Conversely, they de-legitimise punitive, restrictive and patriarchal structures by problematising government actions, religious conservatism and efforts to retain the socio-cultural status quo. This is achieved through emotionally charged evaluation, hypothetical futures that warn of suppressed progress and moral framing that critiques values impeding female advancement. The findings suggest that both mainstream and independent media have adopted a tactically aligned discursive approach to a topic that remains culturally taboo and politically fraught, strategically balancing advocacy with critique to navigate the sensitivities surrounding reproductive justice in Malaysia.

While the similarities were reflected in the discursive goals of de-legitimising restrictive abortion, the differences that highlights the editorial stance and ideological underpinning of *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* in (de)legitimising restrictive abortion are displayed in table 4. The frequency describes structural and stylistic differences and the polarity interprets the ideological positioning and discursive intent.

TABLE 4. Differences of (De)legitimation Strategies Employed in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*

(De)legitimation Strategies	<i>The Star Online</i> (+)	<i>The Star Online</i> (-)	Total	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (+)	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (-)	Total
Van Leeuwen's (De)legitimation Strategies						
Authority						
Expert	17	5	22	13	2	15
Impersonal	12	13	25	6	17	23
Personal	2	0	2	8	5	13
Tradition	1	2	3	4	3	7
Conformity	7	0	7	4	4	8
Role Model	0	0	0	1	0	1
Rationalisation						
Instrumental	13	14	27	8	14	22
Theoretical	3	9	12	14	6	20
Moral						
Evaluation	8	27	35	6	33	39
Abstraction	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reyes' (De)legitimation Strategies						
Appeal to Emotions	4	9	13	1	25	26
Hypothetical Future	9	27	36	12	10	22
Altruism	31	0	31	14	0	14
Total	107	106	213	91	119	210

The comparative distribution of (de)legitimation strategies between *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* reveals distinct editorial orientations and rhetorical priorities. *The Star Online* demonstrates a near-equilibrium between positive (n=107) and negative (n=106) strategies, suggesting a centrist discursive posture that oscillates between institutional affirmation and cautious critique. Its dominant use of impersonal authority (n=25) and instrumental rationalisation (n=27) reflects a technocratic framing that legitimises actors through procedural norms and

pragmatic justification. The outlet's heavy reliance on altruism (n=31) and conformity (n=7) further reinforces a status-quo orientation, foregrounding moral virtue and normative alignment. In contrast, *Malaysiakini* exhibits a pronounced skew toward negative de-legitimation (n=119 vs. 91) signalling a more oppositional and reflexive editorial stance. The outlet amplifies critique through emotionally charged evaluation (n=33), appeals to emotion (n=25) and impersonal authority (n=17) often problematising institutional actors and dominant narratives. Notably, *Malaysiakini* deploys theoretical rationalisation more positively (n=14), indicating a discursive strategy that legitimises dissent through ideological coherence and conceptual framing. These patterns suggest that while *The Star Online* tends to preserve hegemonic stability through procedural and moral legitimation, *Malaysiakini* disrupts dominant framings by foregrounding affective critique, personal authority and ideological reflexivity.

The study shows that both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* have similarities and differences in de-legitimising restrictive abortion. Media, as a discursive mediator, strategically employed (de)legitimation strategies to construct arguments that shape social realities for its readers, particularly in its framing of restrictive abortion laws. The comparative data reveals two distinct social groups, each anchored in divergent value systems, belief structures and ideological intentions. In constructing these realities, both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* projected social groups advocating for de-legitimation in a positive light, while framing those supporting legitimation negatively. This discursive orientation enabled both outlets to foreground existing socio-political and cultural realities that constrain female autonomy, development and reproductive agency thereby reinforcing the de-legitimation of restrictive abortion frameworks. Crucially, both media agencies interrogated the foundational origins of these realities, tracing them to colonial-era laws and policies deeply embedded in conservative and patriarchal ideologies. Through diachronic and synchronic interdiscursive manoeuvres, the outlets drew from multiple domains including medicine, religion, politics, education and governance in arguing the (ir)relevance of these inherited structures within a modern, progressive nation-state. Contrary to prevailing critiques that traditional media in Malaysia operate in favour of the ruling party (Alivi et al., 2018), this study presents evidence that both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* have actively challenged institutional authority, advocating for systemic transformation and gendered liberation.

Historically, Malaysia's cultural relativist stance exemplified by its objection to the universality of human rights at the 1993 World Conference in Vienna (Blackburn, 2011) has shaped its legal and moral positioning on reproductive issues. In response, both media outlets deployed strategies of authority, rationalisation and moral evaluation to expose the socio-political consequences of policies rooted in religious conservatism, cultural orthodoxy and epistemic inertia. These strategies enabled the media to surface the ideological underpinnings of practices often misrepresented as cultural norms, revealing how symbolic manifestations of culture while visible are informed by deeper, often invisible value systems (Hofstede et al., 2010). This analysis further affirms that such values are ideologically laden and frequently mobilised under the guise of religion, tradition and socio-cultural legitimacy (Norris, 2011; Pierson & Bloomer, 2018) to assert control and maintain patriarchal dominance. Literature (Wong et al., 2020) and empirical data (Fatah et al., 2022) underscore the sensitivity and centrality of religion in Malaysian discourse. By tactically deploying authority-based appeals, rationalised argumentation and moral critique, both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* constructed compelling narratives that interrogate the legitimacy of restrictive abortion laws and advocate for a more inclusive, rights-based framework. The strategic deployment of emotional appeals by *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* served as a powerful discursive tool to mobilise reader sentiment toward female rights and reproductive

liberation. Positive emotional registers were embedded in statements that emphasised compassion, empathy and practicality while negative registers surfaced through narratives of discrimination, stigmatisation, punishment and injustice. As Anthony (2018) notes, emotionally charged language in online journalism is often used to evoke visceral reactions such as shock, fear, unease and alarm thereby intensifying audience engagement (Malik & Anuar, 2023). This study demonstrates that emotional appeals were tactically framed, aligning with O'Donovan (2021) findings. Positive effect was mobilised to support de-legitimation while negative effect was directed against legitimisation, thereby reinforcing the ideological critique of restrictive abortion laws. Emotion, understood as a constellation of feelings and behavioural responses to events, is deeply intertwined with cognition and attitude formation (Holt et al., 2017; Cabanac, 2002). Framing emotional appeals therefore becomes a mechanism for eliciting desired reactions and ultimately catalysing action (Lu, 2016). In parallel, the strategy of hypothetical future was employed to construct “what if” scenarios that projected either positive outcomes through structural reform or negative consequences through institutional inertia. This strategy is particularly salient in a socio-cultural context where existing realities are often perceived as immutable truths accepted without interrogation and sustained by generational knowledge. Drawing on Foucault's conception of truth as historically and discursively contingent (Goswami, 2014), this study reveals how media discourses challenge entrenched beliefs such as “abortion is a sin,” “abortion is dangerous,” or “abortion is morally unacceptable” as found in studies by Evan & Narasimhan (2021) and Munson (2019). These notions, once constructed to assert biopower and biopolitics, have over time been naturalised as social realities. Foucault's concern, as cited, is not with the veracity of truth but with the conditions under which truth is formed, legitimised and sustained. By projecting possible futures, media outlets invite readers to critically evaluate the epistemic foundations of what is considered true or false, right or wrong. This discursive manoeuvre opens space for rethinking the socio-political implications of reproductive health narratives and encourages reflexivity in public consciousness.

Additionally, altruism was employed positively by both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* to foster openness toward new knowledge and inclusive perspectives. This strategy extended beyond direct stakeholders, appealing to broader audiences who indirectly contribute to the perpetuation of existing realities. The call to action embedded in altruistic framing was not merely about garnering support but a deeper invitation to expand experiential horizons through factual engagement and liberal reasoning. In doing so, both outlets positioned sexual and reproductive health as a shared societal concern, urging readers to transcend personal biases and embrace a more equitable and informed discourse.

Both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* mobilise positive and negative registers in their (de)legitimation strategies. Positive registers affirm women and girls' autonomy, informed decision-making and comprehensive education as empowerment, legitimising contraceptives and termination options as pragmatic, rights-based responses that dismantle taboos and challenge restrictive norms. At a broader level, these strategies position women's wellbeing as central to national sustainability and systemic transformation (Rance, 1997; Gupta, 2014; Tripathi, 2023). Conversely, negative registers critique government policies, political agendas and discriminatory religious interpretations that reinforce patriarchy, de-legitimising restrictive laws and exposing the socio-cultural practices that obstruct autonomy. Taken together, the data illustrates how both outlets construct layered arguments for inclusive, rights-based approaches that reduce stigma, resist traditional constraints and relieve women and girls of the disproportionate burden of unwanted pregnancies.

While Van Leeuwen's and Reyes' frameworks offer robust typologies for analysing legitimisation, this study also identified three emergent strategies that extend beyond their established scope: appeal to reality, appeal to identity and appeal to religion. Unlike Van Leeuwen's instrumental rationalisation which often projects future-oriented benefits, *appeal to reality* anchors discourse in present, observable conditions such as economic hardship, medical data and lived experience. Similarly, while Reyes' appeal to emotions foregrounds affective resonance, *appeal to identity* constructs legitimacy through shared cultural belonging, national values and gendered experience, centring collective self-definition rather than individual sentiment. *Appeal to religion*, meanwhile, introduces a theological axis of legitimisation, drawing on divine authority and moral absolutism to reinforce or contest abortion discourse. These strategies, though partially overlapping with canonical models, reflect a context-sensitive discursive repertoire that is particularly salient in Malaysian media. Their emergence underscores the need for a more flexible and reflexive analytical framework capable of capturing ideological hybridity and socio-cultural specificity in contemporary reproductive discourse.

TABLE 5. Emergent (De)legitimation Strategies

Concept	Definition	Function in Discourse	Relation to Van Leeuwen & Reyes
Appeal to Reality	Invokes observable, material or lived conditions to justify a claim	Ground arguments in empirical or experiential truth (e.g: economic, hardship, medical data, social inequality)	Overlaps with instrumental rationalisation (Van Leeuwen) and hypothetical future (Reyes) but focus on present conditions
Appeal to Identity	Referencing shared group membership, cultural belonging or ideological alignment	Builds on solidarity or moral legitimacy by invoking who "we" are (e.g: Malaysia values, religious identity, gendered experience)	Related to moral evaluation (Van Leeuwen) and appeal to emotions (Reyes) but centres on collective self-definition
Appeal to Religion	Justifying claims through religious beliefs, doctrines or moral teachings	Confers moral legitimacy by aligning discourse with divine authority, sacred texts or communal values	Partially overlaps with tradition (Van Leeuwen) and appeal to emotions (Reyes) but introduces a distinct theological dimension

CONCLUSION

Opinions supporting the de-legitimation of restrictive abortion reveal underlying ideologies in both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*. This finding challenges the status quo and contradicts earlier scholarship that emphasised sharp distinctions between mainstream and independent media (Lumsden, 2013; Abbott, 2011; Hilley, 2001; Loh, 2009; Nain, 2002; Sani, 2005). Rather than diverging, both outlets adopted tactical approaches to a topic widely regarded as controversial and taboo. While Ho et al. (2003) observed journalists' hesitancy in addressing sensitive issues, the rise of digital media between 2015–2019 has facilitated the democratisation of news production and distribution (Heer et al., 2019), enabling more diverse voices to enter the public sphere. The findings highlight two distinct social groups: those seeking to preserve the existing social order and those challenging it. Both groups articulated their ideologies through soft news coverage, which provided a discursive space for indirect yet meaningful engagement with abortion. Unlike

hard news studies (Kasim et al., 2018; Kasmani, 2019; Keong, 2017) which focus on direct reporting, this study demonstrates how soft news functions as a discursive mediator offering nuanced, ideologically rich narratives that capture both macro-level structures and micro-level practices. In doing so, it shows how abortion, though globally endorsed as a human right, is locally refracted through politics, law, religion and socio-cultural norms. Soft news also further enabled discussion of culturally sensitive issues such as sexual health, education and alternative responses to unintended pregnancies, indirectly prompting reflection on abortion itself and by applying CDA, the study also expands methodological boundaries beyond the hard news tradition. Incorporating audience response to soft news framing would add significant value as it would provide insights into how discursive strategies translate into public opinion and ultimately shape policy influence. Ultimately, this study contributes to Southeast Asian media scholarship by foregrounding the interplay between socio-religious norms, editorial orientation and discursive strategy in reproductive health debates. Prior studies in Malaysia (Tong et al, 2020; Adibah, 2024; Tiew et al., 2025) have shown that abortion discourse intensifies in response to socio-legal controversies and is deeply shaped by religious and cultural taboos. Comparative work in the Philippines (Serrano, 2016) shows how Catholic doctrine frames reproductive rights debates as moral transgressions while Widiyani et al., (2026) reveal that Islamic norms and legal frameworks in Indonesia disproportionately burden women with contraceptive responsibility, reinforcing structural inequalities in reproductive choice. Together, these studies illustrate how socio-religious norms and institutional structures influence media framings of reproductive rights across Southeast Asia. Future research should therefore extend the timeframe to capture shifts in discursive strategies as legal reforms and socio-political developments unfold, tracing how discourse evolves in tandem with broader socio-political change.

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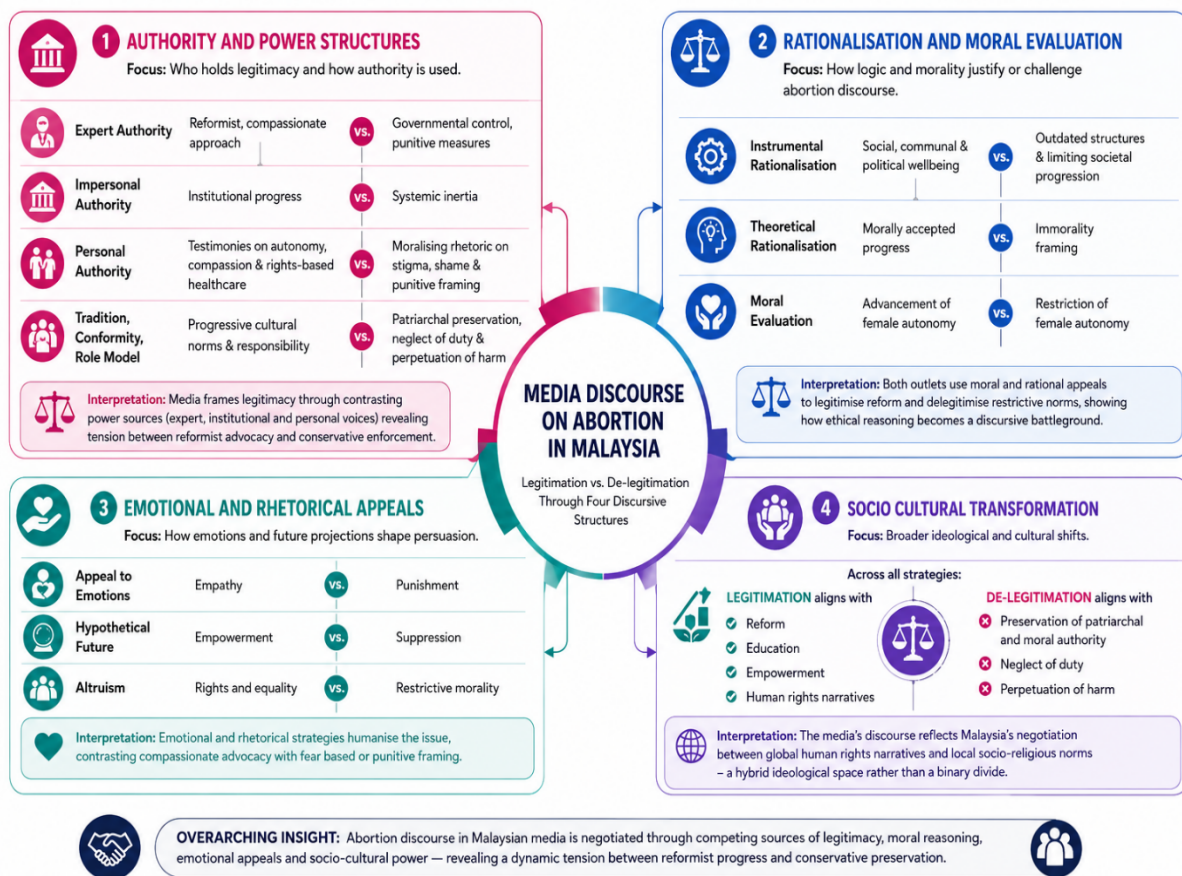
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GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

This manuscript incorporated generative AI assistance using Microsoft Copilot (version: current as of January 2026) to refine language use and phrasing. All intellectual decisions, interpretations, and final edits were made by the authors.

INFOGRAPHIC AND VISUAL

Similarities of *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*



Generated by ChatGPT based on findings

Differences in *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*



Generated by ChatGPT based on findings

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