Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication
https://ejournal.ukm.my/mjc
Volume 42(3) 2026: 607-623

Verification, Public Judgement and Media Responsibility: Examining Trial-by-Media Dynamics in the Zara Qairina Case

ROSNINAWATI HUSSIN*
KARTINI KAMARUZZAMAN
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital media has intensified concerns regarding speculative reporting, public judgement and trial-by-media dynamics in contemporary communication environments. Social media platforms facilitate public participation and information sharing but may also accelerate the circulation of unverified claims and premature public judgements before official investigations are completed. This study examines media coverage of the Zara Qairina case, involving the death of a 13-year-old Malaysian student in July 2025 amid allegations of bullying, an ongoing investigation and widespread demands for accountability. The case provides a context for examining tensions between verification, public speculation and media responsibility in the digital age. Using qualitative content analysis, the study analysed 50 online news articles published by mainstream Malaysian news organisations between 18 and 31 July 2025. The analysis identified four dominant themes: Verification-Oriented Investigation Reporting (60%), Institutional Response and Accountability (18%), Public Judgement and Social Media Speculation (12%) and Emotional Framing and Family Grief (10%). The results indicate that mainstream news coverage was predominantly verification-oriented, emphasising police investigations, witness statements and official updates. However, a smaller proportion of reports reflected public speculation, reputation-related controversies and emotionally framed narratives associated with broader trial-by-media tendencies. Drawing upon Social Responsibility Theory and the Islamic ethical principle of *tabayyun*, the study argues that responsible communication requires verification, communicative restraint and accountability in both professional journalism and participatory digital environments. The study contributes to contemporary discussions on media ethics by demonstrating how trial-by-media dynamics emerge through the interaction of journalism, social media participation and digital information ecosystems.

Keywords: *Trial by media, verification, speculation, media ethics, media responsibility*.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed the contemporary media landscape, enabling information to circulate instantly across online news portals, social media platforms, and participatory digital networks. While these developments have increased access to information and encouraged greater public participation, they have also intensified ethical challenges related to misinformation, speculative reporting and communicative responsibility. In highly competitive digital environments, media organisations and online users increasingly operate within an attention economy that rewards visibility, engagement, and emotional resonance often creating tensions between immediacy and verification (Fuchs, 2021; Newman et al., 2023). As a result, concerns regarding clickbait culture, viral misinformation, and public trust in journalism have become increasingly significant.

*Corresponding author: ninahussin@usim.edu.my
E-ISSN: 2289-1528
https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2026-4203-33
Received: 15 August 2026 | Accepted: 1 September 2026 | Published: 30 September 2026

One of the most prominent ethical concerns emerging from this environment is the phenomenon of trial by media, whereby individuals or institutions are subjected to public judgement before official investigations or legal processes are completed (Carlson et al., 2021; Ward, 2020). Digital and social media platforms have intensified this phenomenon by facilitating the rapid circulation of allegations, interpretations and emotionally charged narratives that may shape public opinion before facts are fully established. In participatory communication environments, journalists, influencers, and ordinary users collectively contribute to information circulation, increasing the likelihood that public narratives develop independently of formal verification processes (Baharom et al., 2023; Van Dalen, 2023).

The death of 13-year-old student Zara Qairina Mahathir in July 2025 attracted widespread media attention and public discussion in Malaysia. Zara Qairina, a Form One student at a religious school in Papar, Sabah, was found unconscious near her school dormitory on 16 July 2025 and died at Queen Elizabeth I Hospital the following day. Her death subsequently became the subject of an ongoing police investigation amid allegations of bullying and growing public calls for a thorough and transparent investigation (Bernama, 2025). While police investigations were still ongoing, the case generated extensive online commentary, public demands for accountability and debates concerning school safety and institutional responsibility. The case is particularly significant because public narratives and allegations circulated alongside an ongoing investigation, creating tension between the public demand for information and the need for verification, procedural fairness and responsible reporting. It therefore provides a relevant case for examining how media reporting, public discourse and verification practices intersect within contemporary digital communication environments. Although social media played an important role in circulating public reactions and speculative narratives, this study focuses specifically on mainstream news organisations because professional journalism operates within established editorial, verification and accountability norms. Examining mainstream coverage therefore enables the study to assess how professional news organisations navigated the tension between verification and the wider speculative discourse surrounding a highly sensitive and ongoing case.

Drawing upon Social Responsibility Theory, journalism ethics, and the Islamic principle of *tabayyun*, this study examines how mainstream Malaysian news organisations reported the Zara Qairina case. Through a qualitative content analysis of 50 online news articles published between 18 and 31 July 2025, the study identifies dominant reporting themes and evaluates the extent to which media coverage reflected verification-oriented journalism, emotional framing, public judgement and institutional accountability. By integrating empirical findings with ethical and theoretical perspectives, the study contributes to contemporary discussions on media responsibility, trial by media, and verification ethics in the digital age.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Trial by Media in the Digital Communication Environment

The phenomenon of trial by media has emerged as a major ethical concern in contemporary journalism and digital communication studies. Trial by media refers to situations in which individuals or institutions are publicly judged through media narratives before formal legal processes are completed (Carlson et al., 2021; Ward, 2020). In such contexts, media coverage and public discourse shape assumptions regarding guilt, morality, and accountability prior to

judicial findings. The rise of digital communication technologies has intensified this phenomenon by accelerating information circulation and amplifying speculative and emotionally charged narratives across online platforms. Taken together, these perspectives conceptualise trial by media not simply as extensive publicity surrounding a case, but as a communicative process through which media narratives and public interpretations may contribute to perceptions of guilt or responsibility before formal investigative or judicial processes are completed.

Traditionally, journalism operated within institutional structures characterised by editorial gatekeeping and verification procedures (Salonen et al., 2023; Baharom et al., 2023). In contrast, digital and social media have transformed communication into a decentralised and participatory environment where journalists, influencers, citizen reporters, and ordinary users simultaneously contribute to information circulation (Baharom et al., 2023; Chew, 2022). While Baharom et al. (2023) emphasise the continuing importance of verification strategies within professional news production, recent research on social media highlights how participatory communication can facilitate both public engagement and the rapid circulation of misinformation and competing interpretations (Latif et al., 2024). Considered together, these studies point to an important distinction between the institutional verification practices expected of professional journalism and the relatively less regulated circulation of information within participatory digital spaces.

The participatory structure of digital communication further complicates trial-by-media dynamics by enabling allegations, interpretations and emotionally charged narratives to circulate rapidly across multiple platforms. While professional news organisations remain subject to editorial and verification norms, social media users can share, comment on and reinterpret emerging information in real time. Taken together, recent scholarship shifts attention from understanding trial by media as a process driven primarily by institutional news organisations towards a more networked process in which journalists, platforms and participating publics collectively shape the visibility and interpretation of contested events (Baharom et al., 2023; Latif et al., 2024; Newman et al., 2023).

The consequences of trial by media extend beyond the formation of public opinion. Premature public judgement may cause reputational harm, psychological distress and social stigma even when subsequent investigations produce contradictory findings (Carlson et al., 2021; Ward, 2020). Media narratives may also generate public pressure surrounding legal and institutional processes (Carlson et al., 2021; Van Dalen, 2023). The Lindy Chamberlain case in Australia provides an established example of these risks, demonstrating how intense and sensationalised media narratives contributed to public judgement and perceptions of guilt before subsequent evidence challenged earlier assumptions (Kowalczyk & Mills, 2026).

These developments suggest that contemporary trials by media dynamics cannot be understood solely through either professional journalism or social media discourse in isolation. Rather, attention is needed to how professional news organisations respond to, reproduce or counter speculative narratives circulating within the wider digital communication environment. This distinction is particularly important during ongoing investigations, when public demand for immediate information may conflict with journalistic obligations concerning verification, fairness and procedural restraint. Examining mainstream reporting of the Zara Qairina case therefore

provides an opportunity to investigate these tensions within the Malaysian communication context.

b. Clickbait Culture and the Attention Economy

The rise of digital journalism has transformed media industries into attention-driven economies in which visibility, clicks and audience engagement increasingly function as forms of commercial value and competitive advantage (Baharom et al., 2023; Ramírez, 2021). In highly competitive online environments, media organisations face increasing pressure to attract audience attention and sustain digital visibility, creating incentives for sensationalised and emotionally provocative forms of presentation (Fuchs, 2021; Newman et al., 2023). Taken together, these developments illustrate how the economic logic of digital media can intersect with editorial practices, contributing to the normalisation of clickbait culture within contemporary journalism (Carlson et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2023).

Clickbait refers to exaggerated or emotionally manipulative headlines designed to maximise audience engagement rather than prioritise informational accuracy. Such headlines frequently exploit outrage, fear, curiosity or shock while minimising contextual clarity (Carlson et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2023). Although clickbait may increase short-term engagement and advertising performance, it can undermine journalistic integrity by prioritising emotional stimulation over careful and contextual reporting (Carlson et al., 2021; Ward, 2020).

Digital platforms further reinforce attention-oriented practices through algorithmic systems that privilege highly engaging content and increase the visibility of material capable of generating audience interaction (Van Dalen, 2023; Newman et al., 2023). Within such environments, emotionally provocative and sensational framing may gain greater visibility because it attracts reactions, sharing and continued engagement (Carlson et al., 2021; Van Dalen, 2023). The literature therefore suggests an important connection between the economic logic of audience attention and the ethical risks of sensational news presentation. In cases involving crime, controversy, or public tragedy, this tension becomes particularly significant because attention-oriented headlines may contribute to premature public judgement before facts are fully established (Carlson et al., 2021; Ward, 2020).

The relationship between clickbait culture and trial-by-media dynamics is therefore particularly relevant to high-profile controversies in which public attention develops alongside incomplete or evolving information. Commercial and platform pressures may create incentives for emotionally engaging presentation, while journalistic norms simultaneously require accuracy, verification and contextual reporting (Fuchs, 2021; Ward, 2020; Newman et al., 2023). Rather than assuming that mainstream journalism necessarily prioritises engagement over verification, this tension raises an empirical question concerning how professional news organisations negotiate attention pressures while reporting sensitive and ongoing public controversies.

c. Speculation, Verification, and Crisis of Digital Journalism

One of the defining challenges of contemporary digital journalism is the tension between immediacy and accuracy (Carlson et al., 2021; Baharom et al., 2023). The competitive demands of the 24-hour news cycle and platform-based news distribution encourage rapid publication in order to maintain audience attention and digital visibility (Newman et al., 2023; Van Dalen, 2023).

Taken together, these conditions place verification practices under increasing temporal pressure, creating a persistent tension between the journalistic norm of accuracy and the digital demand for immediacy.

Verification remains a central professional norm and a key foundation of journalistic credibility (Baharom et al., 2023; Carlson et al., 2021). Baharom et al. (2023), for example, identify multiple strategies used by journalists to verify social media content before incorporating it into news production. At the same time, decentralised information flows, user-generated content and viral dissemination complicate the verification process by increasing both the volume and speed of information requiring assessment. This creates an important distinction between professional verification practices and speculative communication, which may rely on unconfirmed claims, ambiguous framing or emotionally suggestive narratives before factual confirmation is established.

Previous scholarship suggests that speculative communication can influence public perceptions during ongoing investigations, particularly in digitally networked environments where incomplete information circulates rapidly across multiple platforms (Carlson et al., 2021; Van Dalen, 2023). Such conditions may blur distinctions between verified information, interpretation and rumour, increasing the risks of misinformation, reputational harm and declining institutional trust (Carlson et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2023). While these studies highlight the risks associated with speculative digital discourse, they also reinforce the importance of examining whether mainstream news organisations reproduce such uncertainty or counter it through verification-oriented reporting.

The challenges surrounding verification also reflect broader structural transformations within journalism, including economic pressures, declining newsroom resources and platform-driven audience competition (McQuail, 2010; Fuchs, 2021). These conditions may intensify the difficulty of balancing speed, audience engagement and ethical responsibility within competitive digital communication environments. However, verification remains central to journalistic credibility precisely because digital environments are characterised by fragmented information and viral speculation (Carlson et al., 2021; Baharom et al., 2023). In this sense, verification functions not only as a technical journalistic routine but also as an ethical mechanism for distinguishing professional reporting from unverified discourse.

d. Social Responsibility Theory and Media Ethics

Social Responsibility Theory remains an influential framework for understanding journalism ethics and media accountability (Christians et al., 2020; McQuail, 2010). Emerging from concerns regarding sensationalism and the social consequences of press power, Social Responsibility Theory maintains that press freedom must be accompanied by ethical accountability towards society (Siebert et al., 1963; Christians et al., 2020). Media institutions therefore carry obligations to provide truthful, accurate, balanced, and contextualised information that serves the public interest (McQuail, 2010; Ward, 2020).

McQuail (2010) conceptualises journalism as serving a public function grounded in principles such as fairness, accountability and the provision of reliable information. In contemporary digital environments, however, these normative expectations operate alongside pressures associated with clickbait culture, misinformation, speculative reporting and

algorithmically amplified content. The tension between these competing demands raises important questions about how professional news organisations balance audience engagement and immediacy with their responsibilities for verification, contextual reporting and harm minimisation (Christians et al., 2020; Ward, 2020).

Trial-by-media dynamics make these ethical tensions particularly visible. Premature public judgement may undermine fairness and procedural justice while contributing to reputational and psychological harm within digitally mediated communication environments (Carlson et al., 2021; Christians et al., 2020). From a Social Responsibility Theory perspective, professional journalism therefore carries an obligation to balance the public's right to information with verification, contextual accuracy and sensitivity towards individuals affected by public controversies (Ward, 2020; Christians et al., 2020). Within the present study, Social Responsibility Theory provides a normative framework for evaluating whether mainstream news coverage demonstrates these responsibilities when reporting a highly sensitive case amid ongoing investigation and wider digital speculation.

e. 'Tabayyun' as an Ethical Framework for Responsible Communication

Within Islamic communication ethics, the principle of *tabayyun* provides a complementary framework for understanding verification and responsible information dissemination. Derived from the Arabic root *bayyana*, referring to clarification or verification, *tabayyun* emphasises the ethical obligation to investigate and confirm information carefully before accepting or disseminating it (Bakar et al., 2024).

The ethical foundation of *tabayyun* is commonly associated with Surah al-Hujurat (Al-Qur'an, 49:6), which emphasises verification of information before acting upon it in ways that may cause harm. Although rooted in Islamic ethical thought, *tabayyun* shares important normative concerns with journalism ethics, particularly accuracy, accountability and harm prevention (Al-Qur'an, 49:6; Christians et al., 2020).

In this study, *tabayyun* complements Social Responsibility Theory by extending verification from a professional journalistic obligation to a broader ethical responsibility concerning the consequences of receiving and disseminating information. While Social Responsibility Theory emphasises the institutional responsibilities of professional media, *tabayyun* foregrounds individual as well as communicative responsibility to verify information and avoid harm. Together, the two perspectives provide a complementary ethical basis for examining verification, public judgement and responsible communication within digitally networked environments.

f. Research Gap

Despite growing scholarship on trial by media, misinformation, and digital journalism ethics, limited empirical research has examined how mainstream Malaysian news organisations report high-profile public controversies while official investigations are still ongoing. Existing studies have examined media responsibility, verification and digital misinformation at conceptual or broader levels, while relatively less attention has been given to how these ethical tensions are manifested in the reporting patterns of mainstream news organisations within specific Malaysian cases. This leaves an empirical and contextual gap in understanding whether professional news

coverage primarily reinforces speculative public narratives or operates as a verification-oriented counterbalance within highly networked digital communication environments. The Zara Qairina case provides a timely context for addressing this gap because intense public speculation and demands for accountability developed alongside ongoing investigative and institutional responses. By examining the dominant reporting patterns in mainstream coverage of the case, this study contributes empirical evidence on how professional journalism negotiates verification, public judgement, emotional framing and institutional accountability, while also extending discussions of media responsibility through the complementary perspectives of Social Responsibility Theory and *tabayyun*.

g. Research Questions

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the dominant reporting themes in mainstream Malaysian news coverage of the Zara Qairina case?

RQ2: How were verification, emotional framing, public judgement and institutional accountability represented in news coverage of the Zara Qairina case?

RQ3: What do these findings reveal about trial-by-media dynamics and media responsibility in contemporary digital communication environments?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine media reporting of the Zara Qairina case and its implications for media responsibility, verification practices and trial-by-media dynamics. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for identifying recurring patterns, themes and representations within media texts while allowing researchers to examine how particular issues are framed and communicated in public discourse. The approach was selected because the study seeks to identify and interpret dominant reporting patterns rather than to produce statistically generalisable estimates of Malaysian news coverage.

a. Data Collection

The study analysed a purposive sample of 50 online news articles related to the Zara Qairina case published between 18 and 31 July 2025. This period was selected because it represented the most intensive phase of media coverage following the incident and coincided with ongoing police investigations, public discussions and institutional responses. Articles were retrieved through the LexisNexis database and supplemented by manual searches of official news portals using Google Search to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant reports. Search terms included “Zara Qairina”, “Kematian Zara Qairina”, “kes Zara Qairina” and related keywords associated with the case. The retrieved articles were screened according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in a final sample of 50 news reports. The final sample was considered appropriate for the study’s qualitative and case-focused design because it provided sufficient textual material to identify recurring reporting patterns across multiple mainstream news organisations while allowing detailed, article-level analysis within the selected period. The purpose of the sampling was therefore analytical depth and diversity of coverage rather than statistical representativeness (Flick, 2018). The final sample comprised articles published by

mainstream Malaysian news organisations, including Bernama, Berita Harian, Harian Metro, Utusan Malaysia, Sinar Harian, Kosmo, Malay Mail, Malaysiakini, Berita RTM, Buletin TV3, Sabah Media, NST and Utusan Borneo.

Only news reports directly related to the Zara Qairina case were included in the sample. Articles were included regardless of whether they focused on investigation updates, family responses, public reactions or institutional statements, provided that the Zara Qairina case constituted the primary focus of the report. Duplicate reports, opinion pieces, editorials and unrelated articles were excluded to ensure consistency in the analysis.

b. Coding Framework

Each article was analysed using a coding framework developed deductively from previous scholarship on journalism ethics, media responsibility, trial by media, verification practices and digital communication. Article type and primary source were recorded categorically, while speculation, emotional language, public judgement and verification were coded according to their presence (1) or absence (0) in each article. The coding categories included:

i. Article Type
   - News report
   - Follow-up news

ii. Primary Source
   - Police
   - Government
   - Family
   - Public/Individual

iii. Speculation
   - Presence of unverified claims, allegations, rumours or assumptions.

iv. Emotional Language
   - Presence of emotionally charged expressions relating to grief, outrage, sympathy, fear or distress.

v. Public Judgement
   - Presence of blame attribution, moral condemnation, accusations or assumptions of responsibility before official findings.

vi. Verification
   - References to investigations, evidence gathering, witness statements, official confirmation or calls for verification.

c. Coding Procedure

Each article was read and coded manually by the principal researcher according to the predefined coding framework. To access intercoder reliability, a second researcher independently coded 20% of the sample (n=10) using the same coding framework and operational definitions without access to the principal researcher's coding decisions. Cohen's Kappa (κ) was calculated to assess agreement between the two coders beyond chance. For the dominant thematic classification, which formed the basis of the thematic distribution reported in the study, the two coders

achieved 80% observed agreement and κ = .706, indicating substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Article type and primary source were first recorded categorically, followed by binary coding of speculation, emotional language, public judgement and verification according to their presence (1) or absence (0). These four binary categories were not mutually exclusive; an article could contain more than one coded feature.

Following the initial coding, the articles were reviewed comparatively to identify recurring patterns and their dominant thematic orientation. Where an article contained multiple coded features, thematic classification was determined by its primary narrative focus and overall emphasis rather than by the presence of any single code. For example, an article containing emotional language was not necessarily classified under Emotional Framing and Family Grief if its primary focus concerned an investigation update. Similarly, the presence of public speculation did not determine thematic classification when the article primarily emphasised official verification or institutional response. Each article was therefore assigned to one dominant theme according to the reporting focus that received the greatest narrative emphasis. The coded data were subsequently tabulated to identify the frequency and distribution of dominant reporting themes across the sample.

d. Thematic Analysis

Following the coding process, the articles were compared according to recurring combinations of source use, verification, speculation, emotional language and public judgement. This comparative analysis resulted in four dominant thematic orientations:

1. Verification-Oriented Investigation Reporting
2. Institutional Response and Accountability
3. Public Judgement and Social Media Speculation
4. Emotional Framing and Family Grief

These themes represent the predominant narrative orientation of each article rather than mutually exclusive content features, as individual reports could contain secondary characteristics associated with other themes. Thematic categorisation enabled the identification of broader reporting patterns and facilitated analysis of how verification, emotional framing, public speculation and institutional accountability were represented across mainstream media coverage of the case.

e. Analytical Framework

The findings were interpreted using Social Responsibility Theory, which emphasises the ethical obligations of media organisations to provide accurate, fair and responsible information in the public interest (Christians et al., 2020; Ward, 2020). The analysis was further informed by the Islamic ethical principle of *tabayyun*, which emphasises verification, caution and accountability in information dissemination (Al-Qur'an, 49:6). Social Responsibility Theory provided a normative basis for evaluating professional media practices, while *tabayyun* offered a complementary ethical perspective on verification and the consequences of disseminating information. Together,

these frameworks guided the interpretation of verification, public judgement and communicative responsibility within the analysed news coverage.

RESULTS

a. Overview of News Coverage

A total of 50 online news articles related to the Zara Qairina case published between 18 and 31 July 2025 were analysed. The articles were drawn from mainstream Malaysian news organisations and examined to identify dominant reporting patterns, source utilisation and the presence of speculation, emotional language, public judgement and verification.

The analysis revealed four dominant themes in the media coverage. As shown in Table 1, Verification-Oriented Investigation Reporting emerged as the most prevalent theme, accounting for 60% of the analysed articles. This was followed by Institutional Response and Accountability (18%), Public Judgement and Social Media Speculation (12%) and Emotional Framing and Family Grief (10%). As explained in the coding procedure, each article was assigned to one dominant theme based on its primary narrative focus and overall emphasis, although individual articles could contain secondary characteristics associated with other themes.

Table 1: Dominant Themes in News Coverage of the Zara Qairina Case

Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Verification-Oriented Investigation Reporting	30	60.0
Institutional Response and Accountability	9	18.0
Public Judgement and Social Media Speculation	6	12.0
Emotional Framing and Family Grief	5	10.0
Total	50	100.0

The findings indicate that verification-oriented reporting clearly dominated mainstream coverage, accounting for three-fifths of all analysed articles. However, smaller proportions of reports were primarily oriented towards institutional accountability, public speculation and emotional narratives. Verification-oriented reporting was characterised by a strong reliance on official sources and investigative developments.

b. Verification-Oriented Investigation Reporting

Verification-Oriented Investigation Reporting constituted the largest theme, representing 30 of the 50 analysed articles (60%). These reports focused primarily on police investigations, witness statements, forensic procedures and official updates concerning the progress of the case. Police officers and investigative authorities were the most frequently cited sources, while reports often emphasised ongoing investigations and cautioned against premature conclusions.

Common reporting patterns included updates on witness interviews, statements from the Sabah Police Commissioner, references to Bukit Aman investigations and appeals for the public to avoid speculation. Such reports generally prioritised factual developments, procedural transparency and verification of information during the ongoing investigation.

c. Institutional Response and Accountability

Nine articles (18%) focused on institutional responses to the case. These reports highlighted statements from the Ministry of Education (KPM), state education authorities, politicians and Members of Parliament. Coverage centred on issues such as school safety, anti-bullying measures, accountability, transparency and public confidence in educational institutions. The findings indicate that the case extended beyond a criminal investigation and became a broader discussion concerning institutional responsibility, governance and student welfare within the education system.

d. Public Judgement and Social Media Speculation

Six articles (12%) reflected public judgement and social media speculation. These reports typically involved allegations circulated online, public accusations, reputation management and responses by individuals whose names had been associated with the case. Examples included reports involving former school administrators, politicians and other individuals publicly linked to the incident through social media discourse. Although representing a minority of the sample, these reports contained public narratives and allegations that circulated before official findings were available.

e. Emotional Framing and Family Grief

Five articles (10%) focused primarily on the emotional experiences of Zara Qairina's family. These reports highlighted grief, loss, calls for justice and personal reflections by family members. Emotional language was particularly evident in reports discussing the mother's reactions, memories of the victim and requests for further investigation. While limited in number, these reports demonstrate the human-interest dimension of media coverage through the use of emotionally oriented narratives surrounding family grief, loss and calls for justice.

Overall, the findings indicate that mainstream media coverage of the Zara Qairina case was predominantly verification-oriented, while the other three thematic orientations were considerably less prevalent. These findings provide a basis for examining the implications of media responsibility, verification practices and trial-by-media dynamics in the Discussion section.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

a. The Zara Qairina Case and Verification-Oriented Journalism

One of the most significant findings of this study is that mainstream Malaysian news coverage of the Zara Qairina case was predominantly verification-oriented. Against concerns in the literature that digital news environments may encourage sensationalism, speculation and attention-oriented reporting (Carlson et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2023), 60% of the analysed reports focused on police investigations, witness statements and official updates. This pattern suggests that mainstream journalism may perform a moderating role within a wider digital communication environment characterised by rapidly circulating speculation, particularly by privileging official sources and investigative developments. More importantly, it reinforces the continuing relevance of verification as a central journalistic norm within contemporary digital news environments (Baharom et al., 2023; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

The prominence of verification-oriented reporting suggests that mainstream news organisations generally sought to prioritise factual accuracy and procedural fairness during an ongoing investigation. Such practices are consistent with Social Responsibility Theory, which emphasises the obligation of media institutions to provide accurate and responsible information in the public interest. In this context, verification can be understood not merely as a routine journalistic practice but as an expression of institutional responsibility, particularly when unverified claims and public accusations are circulating within the wider digital environment. The findings therefore demonstrate the continuing relevance of Social Responsibility Theory in explaining how professional journalism may distinguish itself from less regulated forms of participatory communication during sensitive public controversies.

b. Social Media, Public Judgement and Trial-by-Media Dynamics

Although verification-oriented reporting dominated mainstream coverage, the findings also identified a smaller group of reports characterised by public judgement and social media speculation. These reports frequently emerged in response to allegations circulating on social media and involved individuals publicly defending themselves against accusations or perceived associations with the case.

The findings suggest that trial-by-media tendencies cannot be attributed solely to mainstream journalism but may develop through interactions between professional media reporting, social media discourse and public participation. This observation aligns with contemporary scholarship that identifies digital platforms as key facilitators of rapid information circulation, speculation and public judgement (Carlson et al., 2021; Van Dalen, 2023). From this perspective, trial by media can be understood as an increasingly networked communicative process in which allegations and interpretations circulate across professional and participatory media spaces before official findings are established. The relatively small proportion of such reports in the present study further suggests that mainstream journalism may reproduce elements of wider speculative discourse without speculation becoming the dominant orientation of its coverage.

c. Emotional Narratives and Public Engagement

The presence of emotional framing and family grief in 10% of the analysed reports highlights the role of human-interest storytelling within contemporary journalism. Human-interest framing often focuses on personal experiences and emotional narratives that encourage audience empathy and engagement with news events. Such framing has been found to increase audience involvement and emotional connection to news stories, making complex issues more relatable (Hong, 2013). According to Kasim et al. (2018), framing strategies employed by media organisations influence how audiences interpret news events and construct meanings about social issues. In the context of the Zara Qairina case, emotionally framed reports may therefore have enhanced the human-interest dimension of the coverage while also providing interpretive frames through which the case could be understood.

This presents an ethical tension between the communicative value of emotional storytelling and the need for restraint during an ongoing investigation. While emotional narratives may foster empathy and public awareness, excessive emotionalization may influence

interpretations of responsibility, risk and justice when facts have yet to be fully established. Research on news framing suggests that emotionally framed content can significantly influence how audiences evaluate events and social actors, potentially encouraging premature judgements (Otieno et al., 2013). From a Social Responsibility Theory perspective, the issue is therefore not the presence of emotion itself, but whether emotional framing is accompanied by sufficient verification, context and fairness. The findings reinforce the importance of balancing human-interest storytelling with these journalistic responsibilities during sensitive public controversies.

d. Institutional Accountability and Media Responsibility

The emergence of institutional accountability as the second most prevalent theme demonstrates how the Zara Qairina case evolved beyond an individual tragedy into a broader public discussion concerning school safety, bullying prevention and educational governance. Media coverage provided a platform for public officials, policymakers and educational authorities to communicate their responses regarding ongoing investigations and institutional actions. According to Kasim et al. (2018), media organisations play an important role in communicating public affairs and facilitating interaction between institutions and society through the dissemination of information and public discourse. This function is consistent with the watchdog role of journalism described by McQuail (2010), whereby the media monitor institutions and provide citizens with information necessary for public scrutiny and informed decision-making. In this sense, reporting institutional responses did more than communicate official positions; it also made institutional actions and explanations visible to public scrutiny.

This finding therefore illustrates how journalism may perform informational and accountability functions simultaneously. From a Social Responsibility Theory perspective, media responsibility involves not only providing accurate information but also facilitating informed public discussion on matters of social concern. In the context of the Zara Qairina case, coverage of institutional responses brought questions of school safety, governance and student welfare into the broader public discourse. The findings therefore suggest that mainstream journalism contributed to institutional accountability by providing a communicative space in which official responses could be reported, examined and situated within wider public concerns.

e. 'Tabayyun' as an Ethical Responsibility in Digital Communication

The findings may also be interpreted through the Islamic ethical principle of *tabayyun*, which emphasises verification, caution and responsibility in receiving and disseminating information (Al-Qur'an, 49:6; Bakar et al., 2024). The predominance of verification-oriented reporting in the analysed coverage reflects important parallels with *tabayyun*, particularly the emphasis on establishing the reliability of information before drawing or communicating conclusions. In the context of an ongoing investigation, reliance on official updates, investigative developments and caution against premature speculation can therefore be understood not only as professional journalistic practices but also as consistent with a broader ethical commitment to preventing harm through unverified information.

At the same time, the presence of public judgement, social media speculation and emotional narratives demonstrates why *tabayyun* remains relevant within contemporary digital communication environments. The principle extends ethical responsibility beyond professional

media institutions by emphasising caution in the circulation and interpretation of information that may affect individuals and communities. When considered alongside Social Responsibility Theory, *tabayyun* therefore broadens the ethical interpretation of the findings from institutional media responsibility to communicative responsibility within the wider digital information environment. This complementary perspective is particularly relevant to trial-by-media dynamics, where the consequences of premature judgement may arise through interactions among professional journalism, digital platforms and participating publics.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to 50 online news articles published during a specific period of coverage and therefore may not capture longer-term reporting trends. Second, the study focused exclusively on mainstream news organisations and did not analyse social media content directly, despite the significant role of social media discourse in shaping public perceptions of the case. Future studies may incorporate larger datasets, comparative case studies and social media analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of trial-by-media dynamics in digital communication environments.

CONCLUSION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed how public controversies are reported, discussed, and interpreted within contemporary society. While digital media platforms have expanded opportunities for information sharing and public participation, they have also created conditions that enable speculation, emotional virality and premature public judgement. These developments have intensified concerns regarding media ethics, verification practices and the growing phenomenon of trial by media.

Through a qualitative content analysis of 50 online news articles related to the Zara Qairina case, this study identified four dominant reporting themes: Verification-Oriented Investigation Reporting, Institutional Response and Accountability, Public Judgement and Social Media Speculation and Emotional Framing and Family Grief. The findings revealed that mainstream Malaysian news coverage was predominantly verification-oriented, with most reports focusing on police investigations, witness statements and official updates. This suggests that professional news organisations generally attempted to uphold journalistic principles of verification and procedural fairness during the reporting of a highly sensitive public issue.

At the same time, the study identified a smaller proportion of reports characterised by public speculation, reputation-related controversies and emotionally framed narratives. Although these reports did not dominate the overall coverage, they illustrate how trial-by-media tendencies may emerge when allegations, assumptions and public interpretations circulate before official investigations are completed. The findings therefore suggest that trial-by-media dynamics are not solely the product of professional journalism but are increasingly shaped by interactions between mainstream media, social media participation and digitally networked public discourse.

The study further highlights the continuing relevance of Social Responsibility Theory and the ethical principle of *tabayyun* in contemporary communication environments. Social Responsibility Theory foregrounds the institutional obligations of professional media, while

tabayyun extends ethical responsibility to the reception, verification and dissemination of information within the wider communication environment. In an era characterised by rapid information circulation and heightened public engagement, ethical communication requires not only professional journalistic standards but also responsible participation by digital citizens.

Ultimately, the Zara Qairina case demonstrates that the challenge of preserving justice in the digital age extends beyond preventing misinformation alone. It also requires balancing public interest with verification, communicative restraint and ethical responsibility. Strengthening these principles remains essential for safeguarding public trust, protecting individual reputations and ensuring that media discourse contributes constructively to democratic accountability and social justice.

BIODATA

Rosninawati Hussin (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in the Communication Programme, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Bandar Baru Nilai, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Her research interests include media studies, mass communication, digital media, broadcasting, advertising, and branding. She has published extensively in the areas of media studies, broadcasting, and digital communication, and actively serves as a reviewer for national and international journals. Email: ninahussin@usim.edu.my

Kartini Kamaruzzaman (PhD) is a senior lecturer in the New Media Communications programme, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. Her expertise and research interests focus on digital media, digital campaign and activism including new social social movements and the intersection of religion. Email: kartinikamaruzzaman@usim.edu.my

REFERENCES

Baharom, M., Ahmad Ghazali, A. H., & Ahmad, A. M. Z. (2023). Verification of social media content for news production: A thematic review of journalistic technique and strategies. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, *39*(3), 41–59. https://doi.org/n635

Bakar, A. Y. A., Fazial, F., Abdullah, S. R., Taher, N. H. M., Kasim, N. H., & Hamid, M. S. A. (2024). The concept of Tabayyun in dissemination of information through mass media. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *14*(1), 2630–2642. http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i1/20693

Bernama. (2025, July 31). Statement recorded from 60 witnesses on Zara Qairina's fatal fall – Sabah police. https://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2451556

Carlson, M., Robinson, S., & Lewis, S. C. (2021). *News after Trump: Journalism's crisis of relevance in a changed media culture*. Oxford University Press.

Chew, S. T. (2022). *Social media culture influences on Malaysian digital news reporting* [Final Year Project (Bachelor), Tunku Abdul Rahman University College].

Christians, C. G., Fackler, M., Kreshel, P. J., & Richardson, K. B. (2020). *Media ethics: Cases and moral reasoning* (11th ed.). Routledge.

Flick, U. (2018). Sampling and generalization. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection* (pp. 88–113). SAGE Publications.

Fuchs, C. (2021). *Social media: A critical introduction* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Hong, H. (2013). The effects of human interest framing in television news coverage of medical advances. *Health Communication*, *28*(5), 452–460. https://doi.org/rq83

Kasim, A., Ismail, A., & Wahab, S. A. (2018). Framing strategic news from the perspective of media organizations in Malaysia. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, *34*(1), 330–344. https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2018-3401-20

Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2014). *The elements of journalism* (3rd ed.). Three Rivers Press.

Kowalczyk, E., & Mills, S. (2026). A dingo ate my baby: Dissecting the injustice of the Lindy Chamberlain case. *Scientia et Humanitas: A Journal of Student Research*, *16*, 45–53.

Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, *33*(1), 159–174. https://doi.org/10.2307/2529310

Latif, D., Samad, M. A., Rinawulandari, R., & Kadir, S. A. (2024). Social media in shaping public opinion roles and impact: A systematic review. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, *40*(2), 205–223. https://doi.org/psqs

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Eddy, K., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2023*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023

Otieno, C., Spada, H., & Renkl, A. (2013). Effects of news frames on perceived risk, emotions, and learning. *PLoS One*, *8*(11), e79696. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0079696

Ramírez, D. G. (2021). Journalism in the attention economy: The relation between digital platforms and news organizations. *Brazilian Journalism Research*, *17*(1), 4–27. https://doi.org/10.25200/BJR.v17n1.2021.1332

Salonen, M., Ehrlen, V., Koivula, M., & Talvitie-Lamberg, K. (2023). Post-publication gatekeeping factors and practices: Data, platforms and regulations in news work. *Media and Communication*, *11*(2), 367–378. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6486

Siebert, F., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1963). *Four theories of the press: The authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist concepts of what the press should be and do*. University of Illinois Press.

Van Dalen, A. (2023). *Algorithmic gatekeeping for professional communicators: Power, trust, and legitimacy*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003375258

Ward, S. J. A. (2020). *Ethics and the media: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.