

Clickbait, Rage Bait and The Contestation of Human Rights in Digital Public: A Comparative Study of Malaysia and Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Clickbait; Rage Bait; News Consumption; Civic Society; Human Rights

The study conceptualises comment sections on social media platforms such as TikTok, Threads or Instagram and others as arenas where emotional expression intersects with civic reasoning and rights-based claims. Using a qualitative comparative content analysis, selected cases from Malaysian and Indonesian media accounts employing clickbait and rage-inducing narratives are examined. The analysis focuses on discursive patterns in user responses, including moral positioning, blame attribution, calls for accountability, rights assertions, exclusionary rhetoric, and polarised affective reactions. By comparing how digital publics engage with news stories involving rights related issues such as freedom of expression, religious sensitivities, and minority protections, the study explores whether emotionally charged raming fosters meaningful civic deliberation or intensifies antagonistic discourse. Through this comparative lens, the paper contributes to emerging scholarship on digital culture, civic engagement, and the evolving contestation of human rights in Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

In the current platform-driven digital environment, news visibility is increasingly shaped by clickbait and rage-oriented framing designed to capture attention and provoke emotional reactions. While such strategies enhance engagement within algorithmic systems, Jácobo-Morales and Marino Jiménez (2024) argue that they present a profound challenge to the integrity of civic discourse and the quality of information dissemination. As news organizations increasingly pivot toward these attention-grabbing tactics to ensure financial sustainability, the implications for human rights deliberation remain underexplored, particularly in the Global South.

The phenomenon of clickbait is often theoretically grounded in the curiosity gap. According to Loewenstein (1994), this is a psychological mechanism where a headline deliberately withholds information to create a state of deprivation that the reader feels compelled to resolve. Beyond simple curiosity, contemporary digital media often utilizes rage-oriented or emotionally intense framing to trigger heightened states of arousal. Such narratives are particularly effective at encouraging virality on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. This environment fosters an attention economy where, as Rahmatika and Prisanto (2022) suggest, the value of content is

measured by engagement metrics likes, shares, and comments rather than its contribution to a well-informed citizenry.

In Southeast Asian news landscapes, specifically Malaysia and Indonesia, the prevalence of clickbait has forced a transformation in journalistic practice. Lim and Wilson (2024) note that traditional hard news is frequently sidelined in favor of soft news topics, such as celebrity scandals or emotive personal struggles, which are better optimized for mobile consumption. This shift has resulted in what Muslikhin and Mulyana (2021) term *McJournalism*, a strategic approach where news is produced primarily to go viral, utilizing techniques like exaggeration, bait-and-switch, and ambiguity. While these methods provide a survival mechanism for media entities in a saturated market, they risk eroding public trust and undermining the media's role as the fourth estate.

Furthermore, the intersection of clickbait and rage-oriented framing has significant consequences for how digital publics engage with sensitive rights-related issues. Comment sections on social media platforms have emerged as affective public arenas where emotional expression often overwhelms civic reasoning. Instead of fostering meaningful deliberation, emotionally charged framing frequently intensifies antagonistic discourse, leading to polarized affective reactions, blame attribution, and exclusionary rhetoric. This is particularly evident when news stories involve religious sensitivities, minority protections, or freedom of expression. The effects of these strategies on the audience are complex. While clickbait and sensationalism can pique interest and increase reading intent among certain demographics with Rahmatika and Hidayanto (2020) finding a 55.2% interest rate among Generation Z they frequently lead to disappointment. Kanizaj et al. (2022) observe that when content fails to fulfill the promise of a headline, readers experience a sense of betrayal, contributing to a decline in the perceived credibility of journalism. Prolonged exposure to such tactics can result in digital frailty, characterized by a decreased ability to discern credible news from false information.

This paper examines how clickbait and rage-oriented news content shape civic contestations of human rights within the digital publics of Malaysia and Indonesia. By analyzing discursive patterns in user responses, the study explores whether emotionally charged framing fosters meaningful civic deliberation or intensifies antagonistic discourse. Through this comparative lens, the paper contributes to emerging scholarship on digital culture and the evolving contestation of human rights.

The paper addresses three research questions:

1. How does clickbait and rage-oriented framing shape discursive patterns in user comment sections?
2. How do digital publics in Malaysia and Indonesia negotiate rights-related issues within emotionally charged news posts?
3. Does affective amplification foster meaningful civic deliberation or intensify antagonistic discourse?

By adopting a comparative lens, this study contributes to emerging scholarship on digital culture, civic engagement, and the evolving contestation of human rights in Southeast Asia.

The digital communication landscape of Southeast Asia has entered a transformative and volatile era, characterized by the systemic rise of the outrage economy. As of late 2025 and early 2026, the linguistic and behavioral patterns of internet users in Malaysia and Indonesia have shifted from the passive consumption of fragmented, low-quality content previously termed *brain rot* to an active engagement with rage bait (Andrew, 2026). According to Oxford University Press, which crowned the term its Word of the Year for 2025, rage bait defines content intentionally crafted to provoke anger, indignation, or moral outrage to secure high engagement metrics (*Malay Mail*, Dec 1, 2025). In the context of Malaysia and Indonesia, this phenomenon is not merely an emergent social trend but a core mechanism of platform capitalism that exploits negativity bias to drive revenue. The following analysis examines the socio-economic motivations, psychological drivers, and regulatory responses to this shift, utilizing high-profile cases such as the tragic death of Zara Qairina, the parasocial maneuvers of Jefri Nichol and Ameera Khan, the provocative marketing of the Walid drama, and the professional challenges faced by figures like psychologist Afif Kurniawan.

The transition to a rage-based digital economy is underscored by a new lexicon that reflects the anxieties of a tech-driven society. While clickbait historically relied on curiosity and exaggeration to lure attention, rage bait targets the moral compass of the audience, thriving on polarization and hostility (*Malay Mail*, Jan 31, 2025). According to Najah (2025) in her article continued saying that this evolution is supported by algorithmic systems that prioritize high-arousal emotions, recognizing that anger is more effective at generating comments, shares, and watch time than positive or neutral stimuli.

Term	Definition	Contextual Usage (2025-2026)
Rage Bait	Content designed to elicit anger or outrage by being offensive or provocative.	Used by creators to "farm" engagement through controversial social claims.
Aura Farming	Cultivating a charismatic or mysterious persona intended to convey confidence or coolness.	Employed by influencers to maintain relevance through curated "mystique".
Parasocial	A one-sided emotional intimacy with a celebrity, influencer, or AI.	Drives fan engagement in celebrity relationship rumors (e.g., Jefri Nichol).
Brain Rot	Mental fatigue caused by excessive consumption of low-value, fragmented content.	The predecessor to rage bait; represents a state of cognitive decline.
Slop	High-volume, low-quality AI-generated or recycled content.	Common in news aggregators and content mills in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Based on linguistic analysis by Kehler and Winkielman in Sara (2025), the rapid adoption of rage bait as a common parlance highlights its transparency as a compound noun, making it easily inferable and reusable across different demographics. This linguistic success mirrors the socioeconomic reality where platforms like TikTok and Instagram reward toxicity because it forces users into cycles of anger clicking, transforming moral concern into measurable engagement (Peter, 2026).

The Zara Qairina Case and the Washing Machine Narrative

The death of 13-year-old Zara Qairina Mahathir in Papar, Sabah, serves as a significant case study in the dangers of rage-driven digital discourse in Malaysia. As documented in various reports, she was found unconscious near her school dormitory drain on July 16, 2025, and succumbed to her injuries the following day. The incident, initially treated as a sudden death without a post-mortem, quickly became a focal point for national outrage after her family alleged that bullying and institutional inaction were the true causes (Philip, 2025). In the absence of clear communication from authorities, the digital vacuum was filled by sensationalized claims. According to a report by Bernama (August 21, 2025), an English teacher, Siti Hajar Aflah Sharuddin, was charged for allegedly posting on TikTok that Zara had died after being forced into a washing machine. This claim, which garnered massive views under the account 'SHA Abrienda', was entirely fabricated but perfectly engineered to trigger maximum parental anxiety and moral indignation. Siti Hajar was subsequently charged under Section 505(b) of the Penal Code for spreading false statements with

the intent to cause public alarm. This specific incident illustrates a core feature of rage bait: the use of physically visceral and horrifying imagery to bypass critical thinking and provoke an immediate emotional reaction. Based on community sentiments, the washing machine myth became a symbol of perceived institutional negligence. According to The Star, the hashtag #Justice4Zara became a rallying cry that led to physical gatherings and protests across Malaysia. The public response was driven by a perception that hidden hands or VVIP cover-ups were protecting alleged bullies. This widespread unrest forced a pivot in the official investigation. As noted in reports by CNA (August 20, 2025) and Bernama news on (August 21, 2025), the Attorney-General ordered the exhumation of Zara's body for a fresh post-mortem on August 8, 2025. Eventually, five teenage girls were charged with making threatening communications under Section 507C (1) of the Penal Code.

The Case of Afif Kurniawan: Expert Narratives and Social Media Pressure

The outrage economy also impacts professional experts whose work is simplified or misappropriated. Afif Kurniawan, a prominent psychologist and researcher at Airlangga University, has frequently appeared in Indonesian media discussions regarding mental health (Nurul et al., 2018; Franciso et al., 2020). According to reports from Kompas TV and Suara Surabaya, Afif Kurniawan recently condemned netizen bullying toward the Indonesian U-17 football team. He emphasized that constant negative comments on social media create a loneliness epidemic and damage the mental growth of young athletes. Furthermore, Kurniawan (2021) research on rumination and stigma toward mental health is often pulled into cycles of hostility where professional insights are stripped of context to support polarizing headlines.

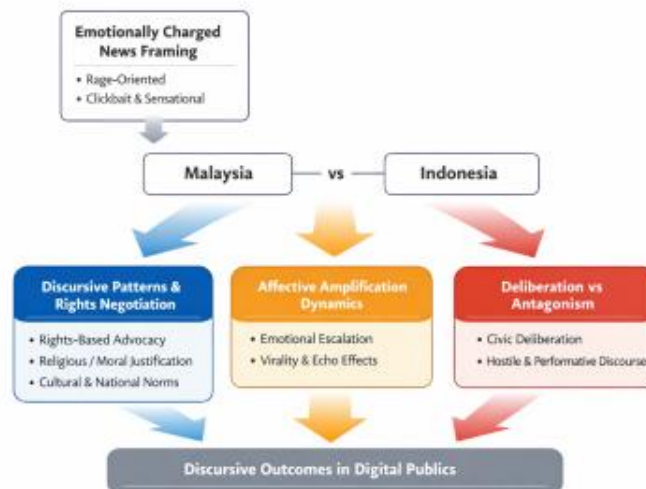
The Cycle of Deletion and Reconciliation: Jefri Nichol and Ameera Khan

In the lifestyle and entertainment sector, the clickbait and rage bait dynamic revolves around parasocial maneuvers. The relationship between Indonesian actor Jefri Nichol and Malaysian influencer Ameera Khan has been a centerpiece of this engagement strategy since 2021. According to Hype Malaysia (November 4, 2025), the couple has frequently utilized social media clean-ups the archiving or deletion of photos to trigger media speculation. In April 2025, after rumors of a breakup, Ameera posted a romantic photo captioned *his jewel*, to which Jefri responded affectionately. This move led netizens to comment that *the whole of Malaysia was scammed*, illustrating a growing public awareness of how influencers manipulate personal narratives for engagement. By November 2025, the pair unfollowed each other again, only to re-follow each other days later. As reported by Mens Folio, Jefri has stated that Ameera's *baddie aura* makes him want to be successful, a classic *aura farming* tactic that maintains their constant relevance (Asha, 2025).

Contentious Marketing and the Walid Drama

The Malaysian entertainment industry has increasingly adopted provocative marketing strategies. The Viu series *Walid* (formerly titled *Bidaah*) serves as a primary example. According to Yahoo News and Malay Mail, the show, which portrays a predatory cult leader named Walid, generated over 2.5 billion TikTok views due to its controversial themes (Azhar, et al., 2025). Based on a report by Dunia Games, the character Walid (played by Faizal Hussein) became a meme in Indonesia, particularly for the dialogue *close your eyes, imagine Walid's face*. Netizens used this catchphrase to criticize authoritarian or manipulative behavior, demonstrating how drama content is repurposed as digital social critique. Actors like Megat have noted that digital platforms allow creative freedom to portray more hostile or scandalous environments compared to traditional TV, which is often leveraged for viral marketing stunts.

Conceptual Framework



2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative comparative content analysis to examine how clickbait and rage-oriented news framing shape public contestation of human rights in digital platforms in Malaysia and Indonesia. Building on the concept of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016) and the digital public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Dahlberg, 2007), the study conceptualises user comments on TikTok, Threads, Websites, Instagram posts or others as arenas where emotional expression intersects with civic reasoning and rights-based claims. A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring the meaning-making processes, emotional responses, and civic engagement patterns in online discussions, as opposed to measuring numerical prevalence (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Sampling Strategy and Case Selection

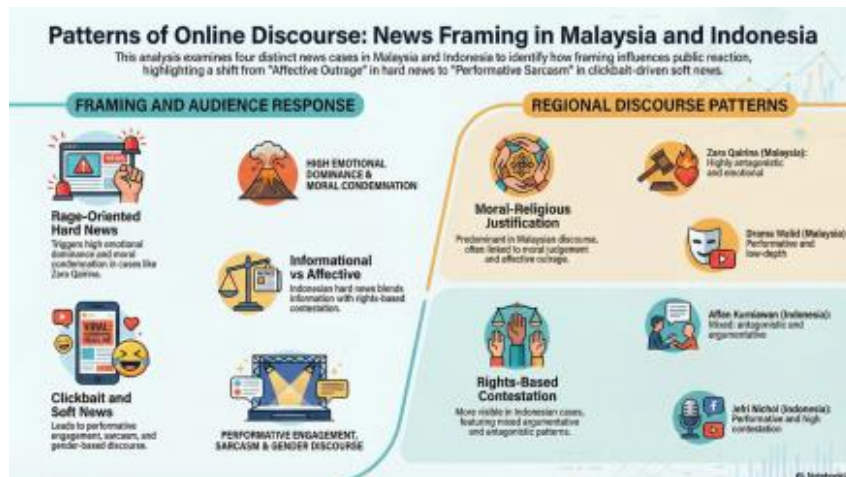
A purposive case-based sampling technique was utilized to identify four viral news cases characterized by varying degrees of emotional intensity and content genre. This non-probability sampling method ensures that selected cases align closely with the study's specific parameters and research objectives, thereby enhancing the rigor and trustworthiness of the results (Campbell et al., 2020). Cases were selected according to three primary criteria: (i) high user engagement metrics (e.g., volume of comments and shares), (ii) the employment of clickbait or rage-oriented framing, and (iii) relevance to socially sensitive or public interest issues (Oliver, as cited in Just Agriculture, 2022). The final sample incorporates a cross-country and cross-genre comparative framework:

- **Malaysia:** The Zara Qairina case (Hard News) and the Drama Walid controversy (Soft News)
- **Indonesia:** The Affan Kurniawan case (Hard News) and the Jefri Nichol and Ameera controversy (Soft News).

The study employs a hybrid of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to examine both manifest and latent meanings within the digital text (Hsieh & Shannon, as cited in UT Austin, n.d.). This approach involves a systematic process of generating codes to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2017). A coding framework was developed to address three distinct analytical dimensions:

1. Discursive patterns in response to specific news framing;
2. Negotiation of rights-related issues within public commentary; and
3. Impact of affective amplification on the overall quality of discourse.

Data were manually collected from publicly accessible posts and corresponding user comments. Only comments in Malay and Indonesian were included to ensure contextual relevance. Comments were transcribed and anonymised, with usernames removed to protect privacy. Screenshots and textual records were maintained for data reliability. Comments were systematically categorized into themes, including affective outrage, antagonistic engagement, rights-based advocacy, religious-moral justification, and deliberative discourse. Finally, a cross-case comparison was conducted to identify thematic similarities and divergences between the two nations and across the hard/soft news divide.



3. Result and Discussion

In the contemporary digital landscapes of Malaysia and Indonesia, public discourse is increasingly shaped by algorithm-driven visibility, emotional amplification, and engagement-oriented content. Across the two case studies Zara Qairina and Affan Kurniawan will be used to discuss the discursive patterns in user comment sections are significantly shaped by the strategic use of clickbait and rage-oriented framing in news headlines and social media posts.

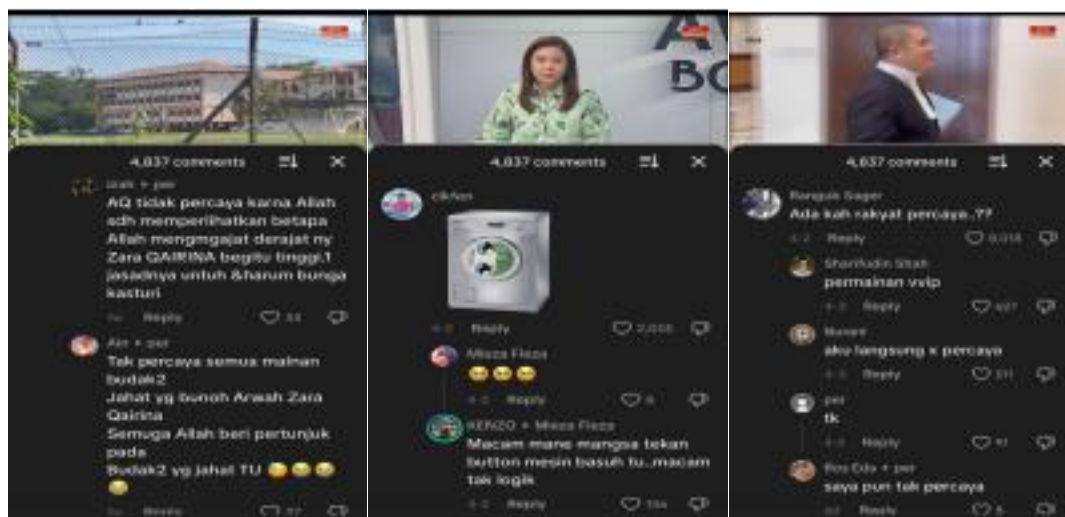
3.1 Discursive Patterns Shaped by Clickbait and Rage-Oriented Framing





The case of Zara Qairina illustrates how emotionally charged and ambiguous headlines can trigger speculative and affective responses. Early media coverage adopted a procedural tone, focusing on the circumstances surrounding the incident. However, subsequent headlines such as “Zara Qairina dituduh curi wang RM 300 sebelum ditemui tidak sedarkan diri” and “Kematian Zara Qairina: Rakyat bangkit mahu tahu kebenaran” introduced elements of ambiguity, accusation, and emotional appeal. These clickbait features particularly the use of unresolved narratives and moral undertones encouraged audiences to actively interpret and reconstruct the story (Chu & Azman, 2025).

As a result, the comment sections became sites of heightened speculation, distrust, and emotional engagement. Users frequently filled informational gaps with assumptions, questioned institutional credibility, and expressed sympathy alongside anger. This demonstrates that clickbait framing does not merely attract attention but actively structures how audiences make sense of events, often leading to the amplification of unverified claims and moral judgement.



A similar pattern can be observed in the case of Affan Kurniawan, where headlines such as “Tragedi Affan Kurniawan: Nyawa driver Ojol melayang usai dilindas rantis, publikuntut keadilan” and “Sudah ditindas masih juga dilindas” employed strong emotive language and injustice framing. Unlike the Zara case, which relied more on ambiguity, these headlines foregrounded outrage and collective grievance. The use of emotionally loaded terms such as “melayang”, “ditindas”, and “tuntut keadilan” functioned as rage triggers, prompting immediate emotional alignment among audiences.



Consequently, discursive patterns in the comment sections were dominated by anger, calls for justice, and antagonistic expressions toward perceived authorities. Rather than fostering measured discussion, rage-oriented framing intensified affective responses and contributed to polarised and confrontational discourse. In this context, emotional amplification became a mechanism through which narratives of injustice were rapidly circulated and reinforced.

Taken together, these findings suggest that clickbait and rage-oriented framing operate as discursive catalysts within digital media environments. By introducing ambiguity, emotional intensity, and moral cues, such framing strategies shape not only the volume of engagement but also the nature of user discourse. Specifically, they encourage speculative reasoning, amplify emotional reactions, and normalise judgemental and adversarial communication patterns in comment sections.

Headlines that employ clickbait elements such as ambiguity and emotionally charged wording tend to trigger speculative and outrage-driven responses in comment sections. In the case of Zara Qairina and Affan Kurniawan, vague phrasing encouraged users to construct their own narratives, resulting in misinformation amplification and moral policing discourse.

The discursive patterns observed in the contemporary Southeast Asian media sphere are increasingly shaped by what may be termed the Algorithm, Outrage, and Engagement (AOE) framework (Hutchinson, 2025). Under this framework, news outlets and social media users alike utilize clickbait and rage-oriented framing to maximize visibility within platform-mediated attention spaces. The cases of Zara Qairina Mahathir in Malaysia and Affan Kurniawan in Indonesia serve as primary benchmarks for analyzing these dynamics.

3.2 The Negotiation of Rights-Related Issues Within Public Commentary

Theme 2 discussed on the negotiation of rights-related issues was manifested within public commentary that is emotionally charged. To support this, the researchers analyse both of the Walid drama and the Jefri Nichole-Ameera Khan case which reveals that emotions are not just a byproduct of the discussion but are the primary drivers of rights negotiation. For an example, in the comment sections of the Walid drama, it can be seen that aspects of morale or aversive which focus on right to religious sanctity vs artistic freedom. The comments such as "makin ditonton makin mual", "iya kan? di season 1 menurutku tujuan pesan sepertinya sudah tersampaikan. Di season 2 ni rasanya makin banyak episode yang seolah-olah tujuannya memperbanyak penonton, maksud saya terlalu banyak episode yang menunjukkan adegan panas yang tipis-tipis."

Based on this, TikTok users exercised a form of discursive agency, negotiating their right to satirize and resist authoritarian attitudes in their own digital and social environments. Other than that, there are also comments where the social media users supporting the Walid drama as the right to indicate that this kind of drama is important as a lesson. This process aligns with the conceptualization of social media profiles as public forums where the level of protection afforded to

public or influential figures is constantly tested and redefined. On the other hand, there is also another comment which reflects to the appreciative/critical which leads to the right to social awareness and educational content. Referring to the Walid drama series, some comments found on TikTok create awareness and educational content.

The comment sections reveal an active negotiation on rights-related issues especially on the issue related to religion. This tension reflects how digital publics construct and contest the importance of researching the script and collective accountability among Muslims. In the case of the Walid drama, the original journalistic framing might focus on the show's popularity or acting, but the TikTok commentary often drifts toward ideological debates about religious authority and personal autonomy (Ian, 2026).

The other examples is the controversy between Jeffri Nichole and Ameera Khan issue. The negotiation of rights is deeply intertwined with moral foundations, particularly the harm/care foundation. Evaluations of whether a behavior is impolite or wrong are often based on the perceived harm caused to individuals or the group. Moral emotions such as anger, disgust, and sympathy drive users to mobilize their rights in the comment section. The Hostile Media Effect further complicates this negotiation, as partisans perceive the coverage of these controversies as biased against their beliefs (Feldman, 2014). This perception triggers defensive and often aggressive responses in the comment section, where users post accusatory or hateful comments to set the record straight. For an example, aggressive backlash in the comment sections towards Jeffri Nichole and Ameera Khan. The findings demonstrate elements of aggressive backlash, where users expressed strong emotional reactions, including moral criticism and personal attacks, particularly towards Ameera Khan. This reflects the audience's perception that the media content or issue violates their cultural and social values. At the same time, polarized positioning is evident as users are divided into opposing camps those defending personal freedom and those emphasizing moral and cultural boundaries. This division illustrates the Hostile Media Effect, where different audience groups interpret the same issue as biased against their own stance (Gearhart & Holland, 2021).

3.3 Impact of affective amplification on the overall quality of discourse

According to Palder et al., (2014), affective amplification refers to the process by which social media environments intensify the perception of moral outrage, often leading perceivers to interpret emotions as stronger than those actually experienced by the content producers. In the contexts of Malaysia and Indonesia, this amplification has fundamentally altered the quality of public deliberation. This phenomenon, catalyzed by platform algorithms that prioritize high-arousal emotions like anger and awe, fundamentally degrades the deliberative quality of the public sphere.

In the case of Zara Qairina, the amplification of grief and anger led to the rapid spread of the washing machine hoax a visceral but false narrative that necessitated police intervention and arrests for misinformation. Factual accuracy was superseded by emotional truth, turning a tragic sudden death investigation into a polarized demand for justice against unverified VVIP cover-ups. The intense emotional focus on the #Justice4Zara movement amplified unverified claims, such as the widely circulated but false washing machine allegation. This demonstrates how affective intensity can override factual accuracy, leading to a slanderous environment where institutional transparency is demanded through emotional rather than procedural logic.

Meanwhile, the issue of Affan Kurniawan can be concluded as the viral circulation of footage showing a tactical vehicle (Rantis) striking the victim transformed a localized grievance into a symbol of the people versus the elite. This amplification organized public expectations around themes of systemic reform and state restraint, yet also fueled latent polarization that persists beyond the immediate crisis.

In the aspect of affective polarization and identity performance, Jefri Nichol and Ameera Khan was marred by moral policing and digital incivility. Netizens utilized red flag labels and sarcasms to attack the couple. The negotiation centered on persona rights (privacy vs. accountability) and the Hostile Media Effect, where partisans perceived coverage as biased, leading to aggressive backlash

to set the record straight. The amplification of Jefri Nichol's red flag persona and Ameera Khan's as Little Miss Khan image created polarized enclaves. Discourse quality suffered as interactions became dominated by moral policing and personal attacks rather than respectful engagement.

In the Walid drama, discourse oscillated between the right to religious sanctity and artistic freedom, with users employing satire and memetic resistances such as the famous script close your eyes dialogue to critique authoritarianism

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the cases used in this study, involving Zara Qairina, Affan Kurniawan, the Walid drama, and the Jefri Nichol and Ameera Khan controversy reveals a significant shift in the digital public spheres of Malaysia and Indonesia. Public discourse is no longer merely a site for information exchange; it has transitioned into a highly polarized environment governed by the Algorithm, Outrage, and Engagement or AOE framework. Under this framework, media organizations and content creators utilize clickbait and rage-oriented framing to maximize visibility, fundamentally altering the nature of user engagement. For an example, the discussion of discursive reporting can be seen through the cases of Zara Qairina and Affan Kurniawan demonstrate that rage oriented framing operates as a discursive catalyst. Headlines that employ ambiguity and emotive terminology (e.g., melayang, ditindas) trigger immediate emotional alignment, prompting audiences to fill informational gaps with speculation and distrust toward perceived authorities. In both nations, this has led to the normalization of adversarial communication and the rapid dissemination of unverified claims, such as the washing machine hoax in the Zara Qairina case. Within these cases, it also lead to the discusison of negotiation of rights in which commentary serves as a primary site for the negotiation of sociality and persona rights. This is manifested through off-record impoliteness, sarcasm, and mimicry strategies used to attack the quality face and social identity face of public figures like Jefri Nichol or religious characters like Walid.

Meanwhile the public deliberation is severely degraded by affective amplification, a process where the perception of moral outrage is intensified by platform algorithms. This results in discursive drift, a structural mechanism of collective reinterpretation where audiences drift away from the original news frame toward emotional narratives of ideological opposition. In the cases analyzed, factual integrity was consistently superseded by emotional truths, transforming deliberation into a performance of identity where interaction becomes confrontation.

In the long run, both Malaysia and Indonesia, social media has become a Battle of Narratives where the pursuit of virality compromises journalistic standards and the pursuit of social justice is often hijacked by the mechanics of affective polarization. Further study is required to evaluate the psychological and social effects of the legal but harmful category of content. Researchers should investigate how regulatory ambiguity in Malaysia and Indonesia (e.g., UU ITE or the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Act) affects self-censorship and the quality of cross-ideological dialogue.inhabit.

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