

Deconstructing Ideological Polarisation and Moral Incongruence in Gaza War Media Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: The Gaza War, which has been ongoing since 1947 and claimed countless lives, has generated many responses worldwide. Information about this discursive event has also been widely covered in the media. Mediated discourse tends to be ideological. Thus, ideas about the war can be ideologically embedded and constructed to manufacture consented opinions and beliefs. Additionally, although many studies have been conducted on the discourse related to the Israel-Palestine conflict, they have yet to look at the bridge between ideology and moral stance. This is because, as discourse constructs social actions, it is important to uncover the semantic macrostructures within the boundary of morality. The study examines two online news editorials, each expressing a pro-Israeli or pro-Palestine stance. Based on van Dijk's ideological polarisation, the study finds that ideological polarisation does take place in the two articles examined through the discursive strategies of emphasising 'Our' good / 'Their' bad properties or actions and mitigating 'Our' bad / 'Their' good properties or actions. In this case, the Israelis are positively represented as the in-group and the Palestinians are negatively portrayed as the out-group in Article 1 which expresses the ideology of pro-Israelis. However, in Article 2, which expresses the ideology of pro-Palestinians, the Palestinians are positively represented as the in-group and the Israelis are negatively depicted as the out-group. The good and bad properties or actions reflect the moral stance of each side. As Article 1 supports physical violence to avenge their opponents although it condemns terrorism, the mismatch between their ideology and moral stance indicates moral incongruence. However, as physical violence is not mentioned as a way to avenge the opponents, Article 2 tends to remain morally congruent. The study contributes to the vast literature on ideological polarisation in the media representation of the Israel-Palestine conflict with additional insight into how the conflicting ideology, moral stance and a discursive event may suggest moral incongruence.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, ideology, moral incongruence, news discourse, polarisation

Introduction

The severity of the strife between Israel and Palestine needs no introduction. The long ongoing war since 1947 has resulted in countless injuries and fatalities. The most recent attack on October 7 has further escalated the conflict and generated many responses worldwide. Through text and talk, language can evoke emotions and trigger actions. The communication and consumption of information contribute to the meaning-making process involving language users as members of a shared code (henceforth, discourse). How information is produced and interpreted depends on users' knowledge and experience in shaping their opinions and beliefs about what should be embraced or rejected. These opinions and beliefs are ideologically driven to ensure the information is presented and interpreted according to its intended meaning. Ideology is often associated with common-sensical

meanings (van Dijk, 1998; Fairclough, 2001). The notion of common sense refers to the ideas that are aligned with the producer's intention and the audience's interpretation. According to Fairclough (2001), ideology is "implicit assumptions" and "expectations" or "the sense or a coherence of a whole text is generated in a sort of chemical reaction which you get when you put together what's in the text and what's already 'in' the interpreter" (p. 65).

Besides, it is also important to note that information can be mediated and tailored to construct certain views according to the producer's ideology. Media discourse is ideological as it reproduces social meanings to manufacture consented opinions and beliefs through ideologically embedded ideas that may be biased towards a certain stance. Thus, a social event or practice can draw multiple frames in the discourse as different media institutions may serve different ideologies. This is because media institutions are "profit-making organisations" which prioritise whichever options benefit them financially (Fairclough, 1995, p. 45).

A case in point is the vast reporting of biased Western media towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see Ahmad, Abed & Hussain, 2022; Almustafa, 2024; Kareem & Najm, 2024). These studies reported that Israel has always been represented positively while Palestine has always been portrayed negatively. The problem is that these studies only presented the obvious that has been repeatedly reported previously without considering the possible bridge between the discursive practice of biased representation and moral stance. Embracing positive values and actions and rejecting negative ones denote a morally common-sensical stance. In this context, engaging in physical violence to inflict damage on others is most likely to be condemned. Regardless, consenting to the attack on civilians for the sake of retribution can be perceived as an instance of moral incongruence. According to Shukla, Stein, Bush and Janardhanan (2024), moral incongruence has been emphasised in deontology theory and socio-cognitive theory as it enacts one's responses based on personality and mental models. The moral incongruence phenomenon occurs due to a mismatch between expectations and one's moral principles. For instance, an employee may be expected to commit certain wrongdoings although it goes against his moral principles.

Consequently, this may trigger negative emotional and behavioural effects such as outrage and disengagement that can be detrimental to individuals or communities. A study by Grubbs, et al. (2022) demonstrated moral incongruence in the case of addiction to pornography and gambling. The study discovered the link between moral disapproval and behavioural frequency. This theoretical construct can be applied to the discursivity of the Gaza War as it highlights the significance of one's opinion and belief that stems from conflicting expectations and moral principles as expressed in media narratives. Those who are pro- or anti-Israeli or Palestinian may condemn murder but they still condone aggression by attempting to annihilate their opponents in the name of justice (see Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014).

Hence, this paper aims to uncover ideological polarisation in the media narratives of Gaza War hostages and examine how it manifests moral incongruence. In this vein, the analysis intends to address the following research questions:

1. How are social actors, groups or events represented in the narratives?
2. What are the discursive strategies employed in the representation of these social actors or groups?
3. How are these strategies utilised to manifest moral incongruence?

Literature Review

Sociocognitive Approach

The sociocognitive approach, as proposed by van Dijk, is one of the approaches in Critical Discourse Analysis that emphasises the cognitive aspect of the discourse. Sociocognitive, as the name suggests, connects discourse to social structures through cognition that deals with shared knowledge, attitudes and ideologies of members of social groups in communicative situations. Based on cognitive linguistics, it critically studies how language users utilise concepts like metaphors. In other words, it

highlights language users' cognition which includes their knowledge, experience and belief as mental models that influence discourse production and societal structures. As a result, what is perceived to be true is based on language users' mental models.

Along with mental models are mental processes and representations which are also known as cognitive processes such as thinking, evaluating, believing and any other processes that take place in the memory. Hence, the Sociocognitive approach is very much related to short-term memory (STM) and long-term memory (LTM) that build mental models in the form of a standard schematic structure such as "Setting (Place, Time), Participants (and their Identities, Roles and Relationships), Event or Action (and its Intention or Purpose)" (van Dijk, 2018, p. 7). These beliefs stored in the memory influence how language users interpret the information received. How they respond to it depends on their opinion and judgement which contributes to the communicative acts in the discourse production. Hence, due to the difference in mental models, language users may exhibit different attitudes and opinions towards a topic which may contribute to conflicting discourse. For instance, the discourse structures of ideological polarisation focus on the propositions of good or bad actions or properties attributed to certain social actors, groups or events. This demonstrates the influence of mental models in the communication of discourse producers' opinions and ideologies.

Past Studies

To demonstrate how mental models indicate ideological polarisation at work, van Dijk (1998) used the op-ed section of the Washington Post which hosted an attack on Ghadafi as a tyrant leader, just like Saddam Hussein. The analysis unveiled polarisation strategies by highlighting the positive values of the USA and the negative values of the Arabs which further express the superiority of the USA over the Arabs. Additionally, the analysis also revealed biased media representation of the USA as the 'Us' and the Arabs as the 'Others'. Another study related to ideological polarisation was conducted by Davies (2013) who proposed the study of opposites in promoting 'Us' and stigmatising 'Them'. These opposites were realised by rhetorical devices such as antithesis and antonyms and could activate 'Our' superiority and further highlight 'Their' inferiority. His analysis was based on the significance of the lexical and semantic relations in the study of opposites.

Many recent studies conducted on news discourse concerning Israel-Palestine have utilised van Dijk's (1998) ideological square framework in the analysis. Amaireh (2023) analysed 50 news reports on the Israel-Palestine conflict produced by Al Jazeera English in 2021. The findings revealed that the discourse producers' ideologies were embedded in their lexical choices indicating a positive attitude towards the Palestinians while exhibiting a negative attitude towards the Israelis. In this regard, the Palestinians who were portrayed as the innocent victims were regarded as the 'in-group' or 'Us' while the Israelis who were described as victimisers, racists and colonisers were considered as the 'out-group' or 'Them'.

Regardless, unlike the findings in Amaireh's (2023) study, the analysis of 25 samples of news produced by 10 international media agencies on the Gaza War by Almustafa (2024) based on van Dijk's ideological square discovered that anti-Israeli actors were framed as extremists and terrorists for attempting to change the public perception of the actors involved in the conflict. This is because they tried to convince media audiences that the war was launched against the Palestinians and not against Hamas as informed by the pro-Israeli actors. Besides, Kareem and Najm (2024) also analysed Western media discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian strife to examine bias in the reports. The corpus was drawn from YouTube channels like Now This Impact and Middle East Eye and analysed based on van Dijk's ideological square to uncover instances of Self- and Other-representation. The findings indicated that the Western media attempted to ignite sympathy towards the Israelis who were represented as the victims of the Palestinians as those who posed threats towards the former. The study concluded that there was a bias against the Palestinians as they were polarised as the out-group while the Israelis who were favoured in the media were perceived as the in-group. A similar key finding was found in a study by Ahmed, Abed and Hussein (2022) in which the Palestinians were polarised as the out-group. Aimed to unveil how the Palestinians were depicted in the West, the study examined several articles from two Western newspapers based on van Dijk's ideological square. The analysis revealed that the Palestinians were consistently depicted negatively in both newspapers as dangerous actors who threatened the Israelis' existence.

Besides news discourse, political speeches on the Gaza War were also analysed to identify the differences in the ideology and language used. Rababah and Hamdan (2019) studied Netanyahu and Abbas' speeches using van Dijk's Ideological Square and Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar to make sense of how the polarised Self- and Other representations were constructed. It was found that while Self-representation was consistently described with positive values such as 'strong' and 'honourable', the 'Other' was negatively characterised as a 'dire threat' and an 'agent of destruction'.

These studies have unanimously pointed out instances of bias and polarisation based on van Dijk's Ideological Square. Despite this, the analyses have yet to examine the irony in the manifestation of moral incongruence through ideological polarisation as social actors or groups condemn terrorism but act against their moral stance by continuing to participate in terrorism.

Methodology

The study examined two opinion articles which each represented a different voice. The first article (henceforth, Article 1) was published online on November 30, 2024, in the *Jerusalem Post*. This Israeli English newspaper claimed to be the most read and best-selling by the company. Titled 'Color of Pure Evil: Commentary on Moral Inequalities of Israel, Hamas', the article was written by an Israeli consultant associated with the media globally. The article which contains 1969 words cites the recent event of the momentary truce between Israel and Hamas as enacted by a series of hostage exchanges between the two sides.

The second article (henceforth, Article 2) was published online on August 14, 2024, in the *Palestine Chronicle*, an English newspaper aimed to share the narratives of the Palestinians. Titled 'Restoring Psychological Deterrence – Torture of Palestinians as a 'Systematic Strategy'', was produced by a journalist and editor of The Palestine Chronicle. It consists of 952 words and describes the gruesome details of how war hostages were treated in Israeli prisons.

These two articles are chosen due to several reasons. Firstly, the two newspapers represent the perspective of each side engaged in the conflict on hostage situations. Besides, the search for articles that fit the same semantic macrostructures was performed through the search bar on each of the newspaper websites. It results in the two articles which are selected for analysis as they share a common theme of war hostages. In comparing the ideologies of the discourse under examination, there are CDA studies that have utilised two articles as their data (see Rahman & Arefin, 2024; Alyahya, 2023). Despite the difference in the number of words and stance, both articles condemned acts of terror and were concerned about war hostages. Interestingly, although both sides have expressed that violence is against their moral stance, they are still engaged in the conflict and thus, this may suggest moral incongruence.

The articles are examined according to van Dijk's (2018) Sociocognitive Approach in Critical Discourse Analysis which emphasises the significance of mental models that form the ideology of discourse producers. These mental models which may be based on one's knowledge and experience may form his or her moral stance. To examine instances of polarisation, the study utilises van Dijk's (1998) ideological square strategies of 'Us' in-group versus 'Them' out-group representation.

Ideological Square

van Dijk's (1998) ideological square assigns positive values to 'Us' and negative values to 'Them'. This analytical framework has been used in many studies involving Israeli-Palestinian news discourse (see for example, Amaireh, 2023; Obied, 2024) as it specifically focuses and contextualises the framing of conflicted social groups. Figure 1 illustrates the strategies denominating the two polarised sides.

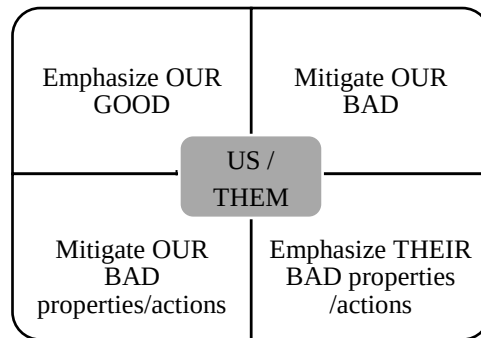


Fig. 1 Ideological Square (van Dijk, 1998, p. 33)

These macro strategies are further elaborated by the categories of analysis that focus on evaluative beliefs igniting the positive and negative attributions of ideological discourse as evident in the following list in Figure 2.

- Overall interaction strategies
 - Positive self-presentation
 - Negative other-presentation
- Macro speech act implying Our 'good' acts and Their 'bad' acts, e.g. accusation, defence
- Semantic macrostructures: topic selection
 - (De-)emphasize negative/ positive topics about Us/ Them
- Local speech acts implementing and sustaining the global ones, e.g. statements that prove accusations
- Local meanings indicating Our/ Their positive/ negative actions
 - Give many/ few details
 - Be general/ specific
 - Be vague/ precise
 - Be explicit/ implicit
 - Etc.
- Lexicon: Select positive words for Us, and negative words for Them
- Local syntax
 - Active vs passive sentences, nominalizations: (de)emphasize Our/ Their positive/ negative agency, responsibility.
- Rhetorical figures
 - Hyperboles vs euphemisms for positive/ negative meanings
 - Metonymies and metaphors emphasizing Our/ Their positive/ negative properties
- Expressions: sounds and visuals
 - Emphasize (loud, etc.: large, bold, etc.) positive/ negative meanings
- Order (first, last: top, bottom, etc.) positive/ negative meanings

Fig. 2 Discourse structures (van Dijk, 2006, p. 373)

According to van Dijk (2006), the discursivity of social group polarisation is demonstrated in various levels of discourse. Choices of words, for instance, can indicate social distance through pronominalisation and demonstratives. Furthermore, passives and nominalisations may conceal the agent's true character to redirect the attribution to others. In terms of rhetorical figures, polarisation is described by contrasting devices that compare two entities to highlight the superiority or inferiority of one from the other.

Findings and Discussion

To address the research questions posed earlier, the analysis is segmented into three parts - first, naming and characterisation of social actors, groups, actions or events; second, ideological polarisation in the nomination and characterisation; and finally, manifestation of moral incongruence through ideological polarisation.

Naming and Characterisation of Social Actors, Groups or Events

Since both articles discuss hostage situations, the analysis finds seven (7) categories of actors, groups and events mentioned. Four (4) are social actors or groups identified as hostages, community, government in general or specific politicians and military. Meanwhile, the other three (3) are social events such as truce, hostage exchange and the war itself.

To address the first research question, the analysis looks at how hostages are named and characterised. Table 1 shows that the detained Israelis are described as innocent and fragile civilians who are harmless to their opponents such as babies, children, women as mothers, individuals who are struck with illnesses and the elderly. In contrast, the Palestinian hostages are referred to as pure evil who are also convicted terrorists and have harmed the Israelis. Names of the hostages are also mentioned to compare the 12-year-old Eitan and mother of twin toddlers, Sharon against convicted terrorists, Israa Jaabis and Marah Bechir who have each committed a grave crime and returned to their neighbourhood to further harm the Israelis. Not only that, Eitan is also described as fatherless as the man (Ohan) is still detained by the Palestinian side. Furthermore, by presenting the contrasts between the hostages representing each side, Article 1 intends to demonstrate the injustice committed towards the Israelis as they need to release the criminals who would endanger their existence in exchange for innocent civilians to save them from acts of terror.

Table 1. Naming and Characteristics of Hostages

Israeli Hostages (Article 1) ○ babies, children, and elderly Israelis are finally reuniting after enduring nearly two months of captivity at the hands of Hamas ○ innocent Israelis ○ innocent civilians ranging from children to the elderly, some suffering from cancer and other illnesses, without their glasses or medication ○ a baby taken from her cradle and kept underground ○ babies, grandparents, and young people who did nothing else other than go to a party to celebrate life ○ children are seen running to their parents and loved ones ○ more are sharing their experiences as captives of Hamas in the underground tunnels of terror ○ 12-year-old Eitan Yahalomi, who was released this week, was forced to watch the videos of the October 7th massacre over and over, held at gunpoint every time he would cry ○ Eitan's father, Ohan, continues to be held separately in Gaza ○ Sharon Aloni Cunio and another unidentified female hostage in matching bright pink jumpsuits, each holding one of Sharon's twin toddlers, Yuli and Emma, as the group slowly makes their way to safety ○ Their father David is still being held captive in Gaza ○ This image of three-year-old twins being carried out of captivity ○ Israeli children to smile weakly and wave under duress and fear of what will happen to their loved ones who remain a hostage of Hamas

Palestinian Hostages

(Article 1)

- pure evil
- glorification of death
- a convicted terrorist who will most certainly continue to spread violence against Israeli civilians
- convicted terrorists
- Israa Jaabis, who detonated a car bomb near the Israeli town of Ma'ale Adumim, seriously injuring an Israeli police officer
- Marah Bechir was just 16 when she stabbed a policeman and Ragah Abu Kias, also 16, opened fire on a group of Israeli civilians in 2021
- Each has returned to their homes in East Jerusalem
- These three terrorists were exchanged for 9-year-old Emily Hand, who was violently abducted by Hamas

(Article 2)

- two women, all displaying signs of ill-treatment
- Palestinian prisoners, who are granted few rights compared to those enshrined by international law, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention
- A few days later, the Palestinian rights group, Addameer, published its own report, "documented cases of torture, sexual violence, and degrading treatment", along with the "systematic abuses and human rights violations committed against detainees from Gaza."

In contrast, Article 2 describes Palestinian prisoners, especially women, who have greatly suffered while being imprisoned by the Israelis. This presents a stark contrast to the claim made in Article 1 in which the Israelis only capture criminals and not innocent civilians. Additionally, Article 2 also presents the injustice on the Palestinian side due to the prisoners' lack of human rights while in prison.

Next, the articles compare the communities representing each side. Again, Article 1 speaks more about how the Jews care about their people especially those detained and released by the Palestinian side. As described in Table 2, their anxiety in watching the hostage release and the joy shared although their family members are still detained tend to indicate their selfless and caring values. Besides, the Israelis are also depicted as loving and emphasising living who continue to feel threatened by the Palestinian community who is also described as pure evil and appreciates death more than being alive. Article 1 also blames the oppressive regime, a reference to Hamas, as the reason for the Palestinians' suffering. In this regard, the blame tends to disassociate the Israelis from the conflict and misery experienced by the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Article 2 characterises the Palestinians as resilient and mentally strong as they were capable of enduring the intense torture by the Israelis.

Table 2. Naming and Characteristics of Community

Israeli community

(Article 1)

- glued to their television screens, witnessing the return of hostages in a global media event, people watch with bated breath, hoping to see innocent Israelis emerge
- sanctity of life

- unity and unwavering national spirit
- intrinsic value that the Jewish people place on life has come with a high cost
- families of those who were not released... share in the joy of the children and grandmothers returning to their families
- they know that Israel continues to push hard to secure their freedom
- collective unity, the overwhelming feeling that each hostage is part of our own family, which Jewish people share
- The release of the Israeli hostages has generated a wave of emotion that has swept over the entire country
- highlighting the collective and conflicting duality of pain and elation
- Like every other Israeli, I feel that each child is like my own
- while we are overjoyed to see the release of these children, our hearts continue to ache for the horrifying trauma they endured, which is starting to come to light
- their family remains fractured
- Still, we need to celebrate the return of each life, especially the women, children, and elderly, whose prolonged abduction has been the most heartbreaking for every Israeli.
- The safe return of our people makes me feel proud to live in this country, a country that will always choose life over death, no matter the cost
- Jewish neighbors will live in continued fear of future terrorist activities
- Israel will never be able to celebrate after the tragic loss of life that has taken place

Palestinian community

(Article 1)

- pure evil
- glorification of death
- Palestinian civilians who are being abused by the oppressive regime that rules over them.

(Article 2)

- Yet, Palestinian resilience continues to grow stronger, because Palestinians are not passive, but active participants in the shaping of their own future.
- Palestinians in Gaza are proving that, despite their unspeakable pain and agony, they are emerging as a whole, ready to clinch their freedom, no matter the cost.
- Palestinians have already succeeded in demolishing Israel's 76-year matrix of physical domination and mental torture.

Another category of social actors or groups constitutes those holding power. In this regard, there is a slight difference between the two articles. As mentioned in Table 3, while Article 1 solely refers to their government as those governing the nation, Article 2 only names certain politicians. This indicates how the voice of the government on the Palestinian side is silenced which may imply their lack of authority. Article 1 positively describes their government as prioritising the lives of its people as shown by how it agrees to the temporary ceasefire and causes the Israeli side to be at a disadvantage as it releases the Palestinians whom they regard as terrorists and allows the Palestinian side to recharge their weapons and strength.

In contrast, Article 2 intends to attribute the suffering to the Israelis by citing the evidence to associate genocide with the perpetrators who were named as and represented by Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It also refers to Israeli politicians such as Feiglin, Ben-Gvir, Netanyahu and Yitzhak Herzog who authorise the Palestinians' endless domination, torture and mass murder. In this article, the Palestinian government or politician is not mentioned.

Table 3. Naming and Characteristics of Government

Israeli Government

(Article 1)

- enabled the supply of vast humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip
- significant concessions made, the nation's moral stance remains resolute.
- safe return of its citizens takes precedence, even at the high cost of halting military operations and releasing Palestinian terrorists
- unwavering commitment to prioritizing the well-being of its people over other considerations
- even when faced with such a difficult strategic decision, ... the Jewish value... the sanctity of life.
- released Palestinian prisoners and detainees, in exchange for over 70 Israeli hostages
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli War Cabinet ultimately decided that Israeli hostages was one of the top priorities
- total elimination of Hamas, despite the significant strategic blow to Israel's military campaign
- to weaken Hamas strongholds
- sacrificed its military advantage
- halting any intelligence and surveillance
- losing more international support
- Israel cannot allow Hamas to remain in control of Gaza
- but we are affording more time for a ceasefire to save as many lives as possible

(Article 2)

- Israel's 76-year matrix of physical domination and mental torture.
- Law for Palestine, a legal advocacy group published a database of over 500 instances of Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, inciting genocide in Gaza.
- Israeli politician Moshe Feiglin told Arutz Sheva-Israel National News that "Muslims are not afraid of us anymore."
- Feiglin saw the element of fear as critical to Israel's well-being if not its very survival
- fear element is directly linked to Israel's behavior and fundamental to its political discourse.
- Historically, Israel has carried out massacres with a specific political strategy in mind
- Such a strategy has been associated with the likes of Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's national security minister.
- perfectly aligned with his equally violent actions: the starvation policy of prisoners, the normalization of torture and the defense of rape.
- Netanyahu's ... called on Israeli soldiers to seek revenge from Palestinians, stating "Remember what Amalek has done to you", was also a blank check for mass murder.
- Israel has granted its army carte blanche to do as it saw fit
- Deir Yassin, Tantara and the over 70 documented massacres during the Palestinian Nakba, or Catastrophe
- to instill the desired fear to drive Palestinians off their land
- His aggressive statements, for example, that Palestinian prisoners should be "shot in the head instead of being given more food"
- tortuous policies...were used against generations of Palestinian prisoners,
- (The material element) ongoing genocide, the killing and wounding of tens of thousands and the near destruction of Gaza.
- The psychological factor...to break the will of the Palestinian people.
- dehumanizing the Palestinians
- Israeli President Yitzhak Herzog, that "there are no innocent civilians in Gaza", was part of the collective death sentence that made the extermination of Palestinians morally justifiable in the eyes of Israelis.
- choosing not to see Palestinians as humans, as innocent, as worthy of life and security
- in the words of Israeli Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, "human animals".

The final category of social actors or groups is the military. Two names are mentioned which are the IDF representing the Israeli military, and Hamas representing the Palestinian military. Article 1 discusses both the Israeli and Palestinian sides while Article 2 only mentions the Israeli side. Based on Table 4, Article 1 describes the military strength of the IDF as greatly superior to Hamas in which even if they are disadvantaged by the ceasefire, they can still destroy their opponents. Moreover, the description also functions to illustrate their determination to exterminate Hamas who are viewed as the terrorists. Besides, Hamas are characterised as pure evil, but they are also named as a brutal regime. They uphold violence and capture innocent Israelis as their hostages. Hamas are also characterised as opportunists who take advantage of the ceasefire to recharge their capabilities. Additionally, they are also manipulative as they appear to care about their hostages and conceal themselves by operating among the civilian Palestinians. In contrast, Article 2 does not mention Hamas but fully concentrates on the brutality of the Israeli army through instances of physical and mental torture.

Table 4. Naming and Characteristics of Military

Israeli Military

(Article 1)

- The IDF is the strongest military power in the region, with undeniable defense and intelligence capabilities.
- Even with a temporary ceasefire hauling its operation...has the capacity and know-how needed to annihilate Hamas and kill every last terrorist commander
- Israel remains one of the strongest military and strategic powers in the world.
- We can wipe out Hamas
- IDF soldiers will be forced to resume their military operations with a significant disadvantage
- renewed fervor to stop at nothing until each of the remaining hostages is safely reunited with their families
- the threat of the Hamas terrorist regime will be forever eradicated

(Article 2)

- The Israeli army has released at least six more Palestinian detainees
- trying to break the will of the Palestinians through torture, humiliation and rape
- Israel wants to restore a different kind of deterrence,
- Israel has also utilized torture, rape and other forms of sexual assault to achieve similar ends in the past, to exact information or to break down the will of prisoners.
- “these practices are intended to punish Palestinians for resisting occupation and seek to destroy them individually and collectively.”
- Israel’s ongoing war in Gaza has manifested all these horrific strategies in ways unprecedented in the past, both in terms of widespread application and frequency.
- Israel’s detention “facilities, in which every inmate is deliberately subjected to harsh, relentless pain and suffering operate as de-facto torture camps”.
- If incidents of rape, sexual assaults and other forms of torture are marked on a map, they would cover a large geographical area, in Gaza, in the West Bank, and Israel itself – mostly notably in the notorious Sde Teiman Camp.
- The mass killing, starvation and widespread rape and torture of Palestinians
- Failing to restore military or strategic deterrence, Tel Aviv is invested in psychological deterrence, as in restoring the element of fear that was breached on October 7.
- Raping prisoners, leaking videos of the gruesome acts, and carrying out the same horrific deed, again and again, are all part of the Israeli strategy – that of restoring fear.

Palestinian Military

(Article 1)

- pure evil
- clutches of their Hamas captors
- Hamas and their followers continue to praise the actions of violence and terror at the hands of their returned prisoners
- threat of the brutal regime is eliminated at its roots.
- Hamas has reluctantly released abducted children, babies, sick, and elderly individuals who suffered in underground terror tunnels in Gaza without adequate medical treatment.
- Hamas and their followers continue to praise the actions of violence and terror at the hands of their returned prisoners
- Hamas will use this ceasefire and the humanitarian aid provided by Israel and the international community to their ends.
- Hamas and the misuse and reappropriation of humanitarian aid have been proven time and time again
- Hamas has used the cover of the ceasefire as a means to regroup, import more weapons, and steal humanitarian supplies for their terror tunnels.
- Hamas will most certainly take oil, medical supplies, and food to their base of operations as a means to outlast the impending resurgence of Israel's military operation
- embedding themselves within the maze of underground tunnels beneath the civilian population.
- the outward attempts by Hamas to portray an exaggerated concern for these hostages
- holding the hands of elderly women and waving at young children is a production of the theater of the absurd
- a thinly veiled attempt to show their world their false sense of humanity.
- continue to separate a father from his children, who have been held in deplorable conditions, sleeping on plastic chairs and eating little to nothing for days on end
- carrying M16 rifles in a neutral zone is so pitiful that it is almost comedic
- These same terrorists who abducted screaming children from their homes and slaughtered their family and friends in one day
- beheaded babies and kept old and sick grandmothers trapped like animals deep underground
- make a mockery of human rights organizations and media alike who fall into the trap of the theatrical performance they have put on
- forcing Israeli children to smile weakly and wave under duress and fear of what will happen to their loved ones who remain a hostage of Hamas
- Hamas is spreading fake news, hugging hostages like they took care of them, but the truth is so evident.
- face of evil
- underscores the extent of Hamas's psychopathy
- disillusionment of a world that seems to humanize their actions.
- Hamas, who are praising the release of convicted terrorists
- 9-year-old Emily Hand, who was violently abducted by Hamas
- Hamas will utilize the resource of time to rely on the relevant actors, such as Qatar and the United States, to put pressure on Israel to find a diplomatic solution.
- Arab and European leadership, as well as the vocal protests around the world, are being utilized as a form of psychological warfare against Israel
- relying on the influence of external powers to supplement Hamas' military disadvantage
- Hamas wants the world to force Israel into a diplomatic solution
- allow them to further poison Palestinian society in an attempt to upend any hope of peace and prosperity in the Middle East

Besides social actors and groups, related social events such as *truce* and *hostage exchange* and *war* also play a role in the naming and characterisation. Firstly, the momentary truce or ceasefire in Article 1 (see Table 3) is described as a military disadvantage for the Israeli side as it allows Hamas to rebuild its strength. Additionally, Article 1 also depicts hostage exchange as unfair to the Israelis because they have to release the Palestinian hostages whom they consider terrorists in exchange for the innocent Israelis (see Table 3). Furthermore, in the same article, hostage exchange is also named the “theater of absurd” (see Table 4), a reference made to Hamas who ironically appear friendly towards the Israeli hostages despite being violent terrorists. Finally, the *war* itself has been mentioned in Article 2 as “destructive” and “bloody” to negatively demonstrate the viciousness of Israelis and the damaging impact on the Palestinians.

The Israeli war on Gaza has proven to be the most **destructive** and **bloody** of all Israeli wars.

Discursive Strategies Demonstrating Ideological Polarisation

The naming and characterisation of Israeli and Palestinian social actors unveil a significant pattern in the semantic macrostructures of positive descriptions of ‘Us’ and negative descriptions of ‘Them’. Article 1 which expresses the stance of an Israeli positively emphasises their good properties or actions as the in-group by describing the Israeli hostages, government and military as innocent and valuing human lives. Note that the opponents are named specifically as Hamas and not the Palestinian civilians. Hence, it is used to justify the attack on Hamas as the Israelis are simply defending themselves against the threat to their existence. This mitigates their bad properties and actions and rationalises the ongoing attack when it describes Hamas as living among the civilian Palestinians. Hence, it implies that collateral damage is unavoidable in annihilating their opponents. Furthermore, it also emphasises the Palestinians’ bad properties and actions and mitigates their good properties and actions as indicated by the lack of positive names and characters. Therefore, Article 1 attributes the Israelis as ‘Us’ and the Palestinians as ‘Them’ due to these discursive strategies indicating ideological polarisation. Meanwhile, Article 2 which represents the Palestinian stance, emphasises their good values and actions by describing them as tough victims who are blessed with mental strength and resilience in enduring the oppression. Additionally, it also emphasises the Israelis’ bad properties and actions and mitigates their good properties and actions by focusing on the Israelis as the perpetrators of war crimes. Hence, the single-sided emphasis on the negative values of the Israelis speaks volumes about their portrayal as ‘Them’ or ‘Others’ in this article.

These findings are consistent with past studies that also reported contrasting values and actions in the representation of Israelis and Palestinians as the in-group or out-group. Amaireh (2023) found that pro-Palestinians are positively represented as opposed to pro-Israelis. Studies such as Almustafa (2024), Kareem and Najm (2024), as well as Ahmed, Abed and Hussein (2022), reported that the Israelis are positively represented while the Palestinians are negatively defined as the out-group.

Ideological Polarisation and Moral Incongruence

The ideological polarisation in both articles has consistently indicated a common pattern in the moral stance of the sides engaged in conflicting discourse. The positive names and characteristics suggest appreciation for positive values and actions while negative names and characteristics indicate rejection of negative values and actions. This moral stance is clearly expressed in the emphasis on the right to life and condemnation of terrorism. For instance, Article 1 which represents the Israeli side as the in-group associates the Israelis with positive values and actions in terms of how they value the life of every single Israeli. It even describes how the Israeli government is willing to agree to the temporary ceasefire and be disadvantaged by the halted attack on their opponents for the sake of saving their people. Furthermore, the article also rejects negative values and actions in terrorism through the depiction of their opponents as the ‘Others’ - the Palestinians specifically Hamas. Nevertheless, as the Israelis also participate in the war, though for the sake of protecting their people from the threats of Others, the actions are incongruent with their moral stance.

In contrast, Article 2, which positively describes the Palestinians as tough victims, focuses mainly on the Israelis' negative values and actions in response to their oppression. In this regard, the condemnation of Israel clearly expresses its moral stance in which negative values and actions such as animosity towards Others as well as physical and mental torture should be rejected. Additionally, it also attributes strong resilience in enduring such torture as a way to fight back their opponents. This means that, unlike Israel's stance that violence must be fought with violence to eliminate their threat, the Palestinian side does not associate itself with Hamas and only uses its mental capacity which is a positive action in response to the physical violence. Thus, its ideology remains to be morally congruent.

These findings tend to be similar to the study by Grubbs, et al. (2022) who found that despite the participants' categorisation of pornography and gambling as immoral, it did not stop them from indulging in these immoral behaviours. Hence, this demonstrates moral incongruence although not in the context of the Gaza War.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study aims to uncover ideological polarisation in the media narratives of Gaza War hostages and examine how it manifests moral incongruence. The analysis has addressed the research questions by looking at how the social actors, groups or events are represented as well as the discursive strategies used and their contribution to the manifestation of moral incongruence. The study finds that, depending on media ideology, the in-group will be represented positively while the out-group will be represented negatively. This shows that ideological polarisation does take place in the two articles examined through the discursive strategies of emphasising 'Our' good / 'Their' bad properties or actions and mitigating 'Our' bad / 'Their' good properties or actions. In this case, the Israelis are considered as the in-group and the Palestinians as the out-group in Article 1 which expresses the ideology of pro-Israelis. However, the Palestinians become the in-group and the Israelis become the out-group in Article 2 which expresses the ideology of pro-Palestinians. By looking at how certain values or actions are accepted or rejected, it reflects the moral stance of each side. As Article 1 supports physical violence to avenge their opponents although it condemns terrorists, the mismatch between their ideology and moral stance indicates moral incongruence. Meanwhile, as physical violence is not mentioned as a way to avenge the opponents, Article 2 tends to remain morally congruent. The study contributes to the vast literature on ideological polarisation in the media representation of the Israel-Palestine conflict with additional insight into how the conflicting ideology, moral stance and a discursive event may suggest moral incongruence.

Suggestions for Future Research

Since the present study has not looked further into the discourse of moral incongruence, it is suggested that future studies delve deeper into this notion to further comprehend and explain its role in any conflict due to the mismatch between ideology, moral stance and social actions.

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