



The Legitimacy of War: Legitimation Discursive Strategies in American and Chinese Political News Discourse

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ABSTRACT

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This study conducts a comparative analysis of the legitimation discursive strategies used by American and Chinese news media, focusing on the issue of the Israel-Hamas war. Based on Van Leeuwen's (2008) legitimation theory, the article compares the stances of different nations' news media toward the controversial issue with the help of various Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theories. Key findings reveal that American and Chinese news media adopt similar macrolevel legitimation discursive strategies but exhibit subtle differences in the use of specific subcategories within these strategies. This different pattern reveals that CNN demonstrates a stronger inclination toward event-driven reporting, while *China Daily* tends to rely more on value-driven approaches. The results of the study highlight how cultural and political contexts shape media narratives, offering insights into the role of legitimation discursive strategies in framing international conflicts and influencing public perception.

KEYWORDS

Israel-Hamas war, legitimation discursive strategy, political news discourse, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Since October 7, 2023, an armed conflict has been ongoing between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. This marks the fifth outbreak of the Gaza-Israel conflict since 2008 and the most extensive Israeli campaign since 1973. Consequently, the conflict has drawn extensive global media attention. According to Wodak (2009), this kind of media coverage falls within the domain of political discourse, which is known for its nuanced use of language and varied rhetorical techniques (Yang and Fu 2018).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) exposes how discourse normalizes ideologies that serve the interests of dominant groups, thereby empowering individuals to resist these forms of manipulation (Van Dijk 2008, p. 13). In CDA research on political discourse, “legitimation” has emerged as a central topic. From a communication perspective, Van Leeuwen (2008) suggests that legitimation fundamentally addresses the question of “why.” This includes questions like “Why should we do this?” and “Why should we do it in this way?” All authoritative systems seek to establish their legitimacy by providing reasons for “why things should be so” (Coicaud 2002). From a discourse analysis standpoint, Van Dijk (2001) notes that political discourse plays a pivotal role in the “legitimation of power and authority”. The justifications for complying with a particular political power “must be conveyed through language,” making discourse essential to the legitimation process (Chilton 2004).

Most existing research on legitimation discourse applies the Discourse-Historical Approach developed by the Vienna School of CDA (see Wodak and Meyer 2015). This research focuses on the social, cultural, and political contexts surrounding legitimation speech acts. However, it pays less attention to the specific linguistic characteristics of legitimation discourse strategies. In response to this gap, the present study develops a comparative corpus using UAM Corpus Tool 6.2j to examine the linguistic techniques themselves. This study applies Van Leeuwen’s (2008) legitimation theory as the analytical framework. It compares the discursive strategies used by U.S. and Chinese news media in covering the Israel-Hamas conflict. The analysis explores how political news subtly employs (de)legitimation strategies to communicate its viewpoints. The focus will be on analyzing the linguistic features, realization methods, and operational mechanisms within legitimation discursive strategies as well as the different social and political effects they intend to achieve.

Discourse serves as a central channel for the dissemination of an ideology and an essential tool in constructing imagined communities (Martin 1995, p. 8). Political discourse in specific is a core mechanism through which politicians shape realities, express viewpoints, and influence public opinion (Van Dijk 1997). The use of legitimation strategies in discourse can reveal the speaker’s underlying (and sometimes otherwise concealed) communicative intentions. Thus, CDA research examining legitimation strategies in political news discourse across media from different countries can expose the ideological stances embedded within national news discourses. This analysis not only deepens the understanding of political discourses but also sheds light on how various media adopt political stances on issues such as conflict.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework of Legitimation

Van Leeuwen (2008) identified the strategy of recontextualization as encompassing two primary processes. The first involves converting specific social practices into discourses. The second function is to provide context-specific legitimations for social practices. It addresses questions like “Why should we engage in this practice?” or

“Why should this practice be done in a particular manner?” To analyze such responses, Van Leeuwen introduced a legitimization framework in 2008, in which he identified four principal categories of strategies that support legitimization structures in discourse and handle the challenges that legitimization processes encounter. These are Authorization, Moral Evaluation, Rationalization, and Mythopoesis.

Legitimation answers the question of why something is accepted or justified. A common response is, “Because someone or something says so.” In this context, the “someone” or “something” serves as the source of legitimization. Van Leeuwen (2008) calls this process Authorization, which includes three subcategories: Authority, Recommendation, and Custom. Authority grants legitimacy based on an individual’s status or institutional role. Examples include a judge making legal rulings, a teacher giving instructions, or a government official enforcing policies. Authority also includes impersonal sources, such as laws and regulations that dictate behavior. Recommendation legitimizes actions by referring to credible figures like experts, celebrities, or role models—people whose endorsements influence public acceptance, such as a doctor advocating for a health practice or a well-known figure promoting a product. Lastly, Custom derives legitimacy from widespread social conventions, following the logic that “everybody else is doing it.”

In contrast to authority-based legitimization, which lacks additional justification, legitimization can also be grounded in justified values, a process Van Leeuwen (2008) termed Moral Evaluation. Moral Evaluation is generally accomplished through three methods: Evaluation, Abstraction, and Analogy. Evaluation involves describing specific characteristics using value-laden adjectives. Abstraction, on the other hand, conceptualizes practices in a more generalized, detached way through which they undergo the process of “moralization” by isolating a particular quality aligned with morally grounded discourse. Analogy involves comparisons being made within discourse that serve to either legitimize or delegitimize a specific subject. In this case, the implicit response to the *why* question is not “Because it is right or good” but rather “Because it resembles another value-laden activity.” The values involved may be either positive or negative.

As in Moral Evaluation, where rationality is implied rather than overt, morality in the Rationalization category remains indirect. Van Leeuwen (2008) distinguishes between two primary types of rationality: Instrumental and Theoretical. Instrumental Rationality legitimizes practices by justifying their objectives, practical applications, and outcomes, incorporating an explicit purpose as well as an implicit moral dimension. In contrast, Theoretical Rationality basis legitimization not on moral correctness, purposefulness, or effectiveness, but by explicitly appealing to an inherent natural order, or “the way things are.”

Legitimation may also be accomplished through storytelling, a process Van Leeuwen (2008) labels Mythopoesis. This approach encompasses both moral and cautionary tales. Moral tales depict scenarios in which a character is celebrated or praised for adhering to social norms. In contrast, cautionary tales illustrate the negative outcomes that arise when social norms are disregarded, with characters engaging in deviant behaviors that result in unfavorable consequences.

It should be highlighted that these four categories may be used independently or in tandem, and they also offer a means for descriptively analyzing specific examples of text and conversation. Moreover, even as these strategies legitimize discourses, they may also serve to delegitimize or critique discourses.

2.2 Legitimation in Political Discourse

Struggles over legitimacy occur across various domains of social life, with regimes, organizations, and individuals seeking to legitimize their practices and ideologies in order to advance their political or social objectives. Legitimacy is closely intertwined with power and ideology, serving as a foundational mechanism for

establishing or sustaining social orders (Weber 1978). As Weber (1947, p. 325) asserts, “every system of authority attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy”. Discourse plays a crucial role in these processes, with social actors employing legitimation strategies to present their actions or ideologies as ethical, beneficial, or essential, in response to criticism or skepticism (Breeze 2012). Bourdieu (1991) links legitimation to symbolic power, the power to define reality through discourse, while Fairclough (2003) argues that legitimacy is constructed by embedding power within moral and ideological discourse, thus bridging the exercise of power and its acceptance. Political discourse, in this view, shapes and is shaped by power relations, helping to naturalize certain assumptions as “common sense” and fostering a shared identity that supports the legitimation of political authority (Chilton 2004). Therefore, examining legitimation strategies from a discursive perspective in political discourse is essential for understanding how legitimacy is constructed, sustained, or reestablished.

News media are often central to agenda-setting: the ability to shape what issues are considered important by the public. As McCombs and Shaw famously argued, “the press may not be successful ... in telling people how to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (1972, p. 177). War presents one highly contentious topic in political news discourse; various international entities closely monitor conflicts and are keen to express their perspectives on whether they believe they are justifiable. For instance, Lin and Miao (2016) utilized Van Leeuwen’s (2008) analytical framework to analyze the distribution, manifestation, and mechanisms of the legitimation discursive strategies in 50 US presidential speeches addressing the Afghanistan War (2001-2021). Their findings show that discursive strategies contrasted a virtuous “us” with a malevolent “other.” This framing presented a brutal and controversial war as a justified act, driven by noble intentions, rational motives, and broad support. Pang (2013) meanwhile utilized Appraisal Theory as an analytical framework and employed corpus-based methods to conduct a comparative analysis of discourses surrounding the Iraq War (2003-2011), focusing on how George W. Bush redefined the war’s legitimacy after the Americans withdrew in 2011. The analysis revealed that post-war discourse recontextualized the Iraq War within the broader “War on Terror” narrative. It reframed the conflict as an ideological struggle between democracy and terrorism, rather than a preemptive war to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction. This redefinition was meant to sustain the ideological legitimacy of the Iraq War, which had become heavily contested.

International conflict, beyond war, captures widespread societal attention as it compels leaders to justify their actions, assert authority, and align public opinion by framing decisions within globally accepted norms, values, and ethical principles. Gong and Zhang (2018) used a corpus-based approach to analyze speeches from the U.S. Department of Defense and Department of State (2010-2016) on territorial disputes in the South China Sea. They applied Van Leeuwen’s (2008) legitimation framework to examine how the United States used (de)legitimation discourse strategies. Their study found that the main (de)legitimation strategy employed in official US discourse on the subject during this period was Rationalization, followed by Authority and Moral Evaluation. The extensive use of (de)legitimation strategies in US discourse facilitated the dissemination of American viewpoints and influenced the direction of international public opinion.

While these aforementioned research on legitimation discourse has effectively applied frameworks like Van Leeuwen’s (2008) model and Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal Theory to categorize macro-level strategies, these studies primarily focus on thematic content and socio-political functions, often overlooking how such strategies are linguistically realized. For instance, analyses of the “us vs. them” dichotomy in war discourse emphasize ideological contrasts but rarely dissect the specific issue such as lexical choices that construct these oppositions. This omission reflects a broader tendency within the Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak and Meyer 2015) to prioritize contextual and ideological analysis while treating linguistic forms as transparent carriers of meaning rather than as integral to the legitimation process. Addressing this gap, this study examines the

linguistic characteristics of legitimation at the micro-level, including lexico-grammatical features (e.g., the usage of evaluative objectives) and discourse-semantic patterns (e.g., presuppositions embedded in sentences). By integrating macro-strategic analysis with micro-linguistic investigation, this study advances beyond the current scholarship's focus on what legitimating claims are made to reveal how they are textually engineered for persuasion. In doing so, it directly addresses the aforementioned research gap, contributing a more linguistically nuanced perspective on the discursive construction of legitimacy.

In political discourse, legitimation is usually accomplished through persuasive discourse, where governmental operations and policies are portrayed as beneficial for society. This framing functions as an active, processual phenomenon in which agents construct and reconstruct social realities to gain public consent. Using legitimation discursive strategies, political actors shape the “discursive construction of reality,” a term Berger and Luckmann (1966) use to describe the active role discourse plays in constructing social facts. As Fairclough (1992) notes, framing within political discourse often embodies subtle power dynamics, where language not only reflects but reinforces dominant ideologies. This process is inherently contentious, as different stakeholders may contest or resist dominant frames, creating a “discursive struggle” over what counts as “legitimate” in the public sphere (Habermas 1984).

3. Research Design

3.1 Data Collection

This study employed news discourses from CNN and *China Daily* as a comparative corpus for CDA research. First, keywords including “Israel war,” “Israel-Hamas war,” “Gaza,” and “Gaza-Israel conflict” were used to locate relevant news reports on the official websites for ¹CNN and ²*China Daily*. The study focused on reports published after January 2024, following the instigation of the fifth Gaza-Israel conflict, which reignited discourse on the issue. A total of 20 Chinese and 10 American documents with similar total word counts were selected. The selected discourses from both outlets included various genres, such as news reports, editorials, and interviews. The total word count of the selected corpus was 10,207 for CNN and 9,653 for *China Daily*.

Tensions between Israel and Hamas have been longstanding, stemming from deep-seated issues related to territorial disputes, political control, and the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The latest escalation began on October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched a multi-level coordinated attack on Israel, which involved rocket fire, ground assaults, and the targeting of civilians. Israel quickly responded with extensive airstrikes and a ground offensive in Gaza, under the official aim of dismantling Hamas' military capabilities. The conflict has resulted in significant Palestinian casualties, leading to a humanitarian crisis in Gaza due to damage to civilian infrastructure and restricted access to essential resources. The conflict has also intensified regional and international debates about security, humanitarian law, and the prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. This highly controversial and ongoing issue was chosen for this study to examine how different international entities construct legitimacy.

CNN is one of the most widely recognized American news networks globally, with a vast audience in over 200 countries. Its content often shapes international perceptions of American perspectives on political, social, and

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com>

² <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn>

economic issues (McPhail 2010). This makes CNN a powerful vehicle for examining how the American media frames global events and issues. *China Daily* is regarded as a representative and reliable source for understanding China's official perspectives on this issue, given its status as an authoritative and international Chinese news outlet (Liu 2018). The language employed can provide valuable insights into how different ideologies are expressed in a Chinese news source. By strategically selecting specific words, phrases, and framing techniques, the publication plays a significant role in shaping both domestic and international perceptions of the highly controversial conflict, thereby communicating its stance. Consequently, conducting a comparative analysis of CNN and *China Daily* will enable the valuable understanding of how different media outlets emphasize specific aspects of a story or adopt distinct ideological positions regarding international conflict (Fairclough 1995).

3.2 Data Annotation and Analysis

This study utilized a corpus tool to enable quantitative analysis, focusing specifically on the application of legitimation discursive strategies within a constructed comparative corpus. ³UAM Corpus Tool 6.2j, an open-access software (O'Donnell 2023), was designed for the linguistic annotation of multimodal data. Due to its specialized capabilities and user-friendliness, this software is widely adopted for annotation. Created by computational linguist Mick O'Donnell in 2007 and continuously updated, it supports the systematic organization of linguistic features within a corpus, thereby greatly reducing the manual labor required for coding.

The statistical analysis of the various legitimation strategies and the proportions of components within the corpus involved three main steps. First, two new corpora were created within UAM Corpus Tool 6.2j, after which political news reports were imported for further analysis. The second step consisted of adding a new annotation layer and configuring an analysis scheme to represent specific linguistic features, facilitating the manual annotation process. Users have the option to employ the tool's existing annotation scheme or to develop and apply a custom scheme tailored to their needs. As the built-in scheme of UAM Corpus Tool 6.2j includes only Appraisal Analysis and Error Analysis, this study used a user-defined legitimacy scheme (Figure 1) based on the theoretical framework by Van Leeuwen (2008).



Figure 1. Theoretical Scheme of Legitimation

Finally, manual annotation was performed to complete the statistical calculations. UAM Corpus Tool 6.2j offers two primary types of annotation processes: document coding and segment coding. Document coding is used to analyze an entire text. Conversely, segment coding can be used to manually define specific segments within a file and assign unique attributes to each segment as the tool construed segment as “one lexical unit containing one linguistic resource.” This study adopted segment coding to measure the frequency and proportion of the four primary types of legitimation discursive strategies, each of which includes several categories and subcategories. As not all categories and subcategories were relevant to the current corpus and annotating down to the subcategory level could be excessively detailed, each segment was instead classified solely at the broader TYPE level. For

³ <http://www.corpustool.com>

example, in the sentence “The strike drew condemnation from various officials, including the UN chief” cited from CNN news “Israeli airstrike on Gaza school sheltering displaced people kills at least 18, including UN staff, Palestinian officials say”, the word “officials” was marked as “AUTHORIZATION,” and the sentence was counted as one segment because it included one discursive legitimation strategy. Each item of political discourse in the corpus was manually annotated by the author three to four times throughout the annotation process to ensure the reliability and validity of the subjective annotations.

Following the manual annotation was the data analysis process, which began with an in-depth examination of lexical features like segment length and lexical complexity. This preliminary analysis was succeeded by a detailed statistical evaluation of the legitimation discursive strategies using the UAM Corpus Tool’s statistical functions. The analysis provided insights into the frequency of each category as well as their overall quantities within the text. Each category in the annotation scheme was systematically counted and analyzed. Additionally, the tool’s lexis function enabled the identification of high-frequency words associated with various strategies. This process involved calculating the frequency of all words in the corpus, identifying legitimation-related words with the highest frequencies, and generating a concordance to examine and compare specific examples in greater detail.

According to Wodak and Meyer (2015), discourses sustain and reproduce unequal power relations by naturalizing the hegemony of dominant ideologies, often in subtle ways. This underscores the role of language in shaping public perceptions and institutionalizing power dynamics. As Van Leeuwen (2008) argues, legitimation involves the systematic process of justifying actions, decisions, or social structures, often embedding ideological assumptions within discourses. Legitimation strategies are thus crucial in news media narratives, where they work to construct and sustain social norms while marginalizing alternative viewpoints (Fairclough 2003). One key feature of CDA is its focus on the systematic unpacking of discursive strategies, which reveal how language is used to legitimize or delegitimize actions and ideologies (Van Dijk 1993). Therefore, this paper draws upon Van Leeuwen’s (2008) theoretical framework of legitimation to reveal how various legitimation discursive strategies are realized in current discourses on the Israel-Hamas conflict.

Wodak and Meyer (2015) argue that CDA does not focus on analyzing the linguistic units themselves; instead, it investigates the complex social phenomena behind them. Nevertheless, CDA typically begins with a textual analysis, which Fairclough (1995) refers to as the “description” phase in his three-dimensional framework for CDA. The analysis then identifies systematic links between discourse structures and ideological frameworks (Van Dijk 1995, p. 143), aligning with the “interpretation” and “explanation” phases in Fairclough’s model, which address the social dimensions of discourse. Therefore, a systematic approach to CDA regarding the legitimation discursive strategies used in the political discourses found in publications by CNN and *China Daily* must first involve an analysis of linguistic patterns. Additionally, the analysis must interpret and contextualize a text from social perspectives to examine how language resources in political news reports are employed to convey a nonneutral stance. This approach can be used to explore how the strategic use of these linguistic techniques can legitimize or delegitimize a contentious issue like conflict, which is consistent with the goals of the current study.

The main results of this analysis are organized into two sections based on the aforementioned statements: an overview of the textual features of the corpus and case analyses of the various legitimation discursive strategies employed in the political news sources. The presentation of the overall lexical patterns aligns with Fairclough’s (1995) description phase, as linguistic features—such as formal properties—should be introduced before advancing to the next analytical dimension. As Gee (2014a) asserts, discourse analysis should focus not only on the words themselves but also on their patterns. Second, the qualitative analysis process corresponds to the interpretation and explanation phases. The case studies are organized according to the subsystems of legitimation discursive strategies, arranged in order of frequency. Not every subsystem is represented in the existing corpus;

the example analysis section will therefore focus solely on the high-frequency subsystems for the case analysis. Following this, these examples will be interpreted using various CDA theories—such as the Cooperative Principle (Bloor and Bloor 2013), Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity, and Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory—to show how the news media tend to legitimate or delegitimize conflicts and defend their points of view through the language they use. After analyzing the examples from the linguistic level, an explanation of the sociocultural effects and intentions behind the use of these different CDA strategies will also be provided, as discourses create representations of the world that not only reflect reality but also actively shape it by ascribing meanings to our surroundings, identities, and relationships (Foucault 1972).

Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative analyses, this paper will thus address the following two research questions:

1. What are the specific distribution patterns of different legitimation discursive strategies in American and Chinese news media?
2. How do different news media legitimize or delegitimize controversial conflicts and what does the usage of specific legitimation discursive strategies indicate?

4. Major Findings

4.1 Overall Lexical Patterns and Distribution of Legitimation Strategies

Fairclough (1995) suggests that linguistic features of the text should be examined in the descriptive stage before conducting the analysis. Therefore, this section begins by presenting the lexical pattern results (Table 1). Overall, 377 lexical units within the CNN corpus were found to contain legitimation discursive strategies. Tokens and words within the segments were calculated accordingly to analyze the segment content. Here, “tokens in segments” refers to the total tokens (including both words and punctuation marks) across all segments, while “words in segments” represents only the wordcount, excluding punctuation. In the CNN corpus, the “tokens in segments” totaled 2,419, while “words in segments” totaled 2,079; this word count comprises 23.7% of the entire corpus, or roughly one-fourth of the total. In terms of text complexity (defined by the UAM Corpus Tool as “the degree of difficulty or challenge presented by a written text”), the average segment length in this corpus was 5.22 words. The average number of tokens per segment was 5.57, with maximum of 17 words in a segment.

Meanwhile, the data for the *China Daily* corpus indicates 357 segments, with an average segment length of 5.5 words. The segments contained a total of 2,351 tokens and 2,116 words, suggesting a moderately high lexical density. The minimum segment length was 6.05 words, and the maximum segment length was 22 words.

Table 1. Overall Lexical Patterns

	Length		Complexity		
	News media		News media		
	CNN	<i>China Daily</i>	CNN	<i>China Daily</i>	
Number of segments	377	357	Avg. Segment length	5.22	5.5
Tokens in segments	2,419	2,351	Min. Segment length	5.57	6.05
Words in segments	2,079	2,116	Max. Segment length	17	22

Text complexity is noteworthy as it significantly influences the construction of meaning in discourse. Complex texts often necessitate that readers engage with subtle arguments and underlying ideologies, making it crucial to

analyze how complexity impacts reader interpretation (Gee 2014b). Based on the above statistics, both sources featured an overall dense, information-rich style. However, CNN tended to favor slightly shorter and more segmented content, while *China Daily* maintained a structure with a marginally longer average segment length. CNN's higher variability in segment length and notable use of legitimation strategies suggests a writing style that balanced accessibility with rhetorical sophistication, allowing for the layering of meanings and framing of arguments within the broader context of the story. Conversely, the segments in *China Daily* were relatively concise but carried substantial word and token counts, reflecting a dense informational style aimed at clarity and consistency.

In addition to analyzing lexical patterns, the software allows the calculation of the overall distribution of various legitimation strategies. Table 2 presents these findings, displaying both the frequency and relative proportion of each category. Overall, CNN and *China Daily* displayed a strong similarity in their use of legitimation strategies, with only minor variations. Both outlets used Authorization, Moral Evaluation, and Rationalization as their main strategies, with minimal reliance on Mythopoesis. CNN relied more on Moral Evaluation, whereas Authorization, Moral Evaluation and Rationalization were distributed in a more balanced manner in *China Daily*. This similarity suggests a broadly aligned approach in how these two media outlets establish credibility, albeit with subtle differences in their framing techniques.

Table 2. Overall Distribution of Legitimacy Discursive Strategies

Legitimation	Frequency		Proportion	
	CNN	<i>China Daily</i>	CNN	<i>China Daily</i>
Authorization	121	115	32.10%	32.21%
Moral Evaluation	138	123	36.60%	34.45%
Rationalization	113	111	29.97%	31.09%
Mythopoesis	5	8	1.33%	2.25%
Total	377	357	100%	100%

When it comes to the detailed distribution of each strategy, Moral Evaluation was the most preferred by both news outlets, although CNN showed a slightly higher frequency (138 instances) compared to *China Daily* (123 instances). Proportionally, CNN used Moral Evaluation 36.60% of the time, while *China Daily* did so 34.45% of the time. Authorization was used at similar rates by both CNN and *China Daily* and was the second most frequently used strategy, with CNN having a frequency of 121 and *China Daily* 115. Both outlets displayed nearly identical proportional uses of Authorization, with CNN at 32.10% and *China Daily* at 32.21%. Both outlets also had similar frequency counts for Rationalization, with CNN at 113 and *China Daily* at 111. The proportional usage of this strategy was also close, with CNN at 29.97% and *China Daily* at 31.09%. Mythopoesis was the least used legitimation strategy by both outlets, with CNN recording a frequency of 5 and *China Daily* 8. This indicates that proportionally, CNN incorporated Mythopoesis in 1.33% of its content, while *China Daily* included it in 2.25%. This consistent distribution suggests that, in addition to relying on authority or moral framing alone, both news sources also employed rational, evidence-based arguments with almost equal emphasis.

The following section presents a detailed analysis of each strategy and its respective substrategies, examining whether the different news outlets selected distinct subcategories of legitimation, despite the broad types of legitimation strategies being similar. Due to the exceptionally low proportion of Mythopoesis in the current corpus, this strategy will be excluded from the data analysis.

4.2 Moral Evaluation

As noted above, Moral Evaluation was the most employed strategy in discourse across both news outlets, accounting for 36.60% of CNN's coverage and 34.45% of *China Daily*'s. The three components of Moral Evaluation, namely Evaluation, Abstraction, and Analogy, can all be found in the comparative corpora. Its high frequency clearly demonstrates that the two outlets tended to use various evaluative adjectives when assessing the legitimacy of the Israel-Hamas war. At the same time, abstracting the discussion of the conflict to a certain degree facilitated the media's ability to convey their definitions and perspectives to their readers. Contrasting the current devastation of the conflict with past periods of peace also effectively underscored its brutality and irrationality.

Evaluative adjectives are central to the process of legitimation through Moral Evaluation strategy (Van Leeuwen 2008). According to the lexical function of the tool, both media outlets favored the use of evaluative adjectives to describe the conflict and its impacts. The most frequent utilized adjectives were "displaced" (12 times for CNN), "unprecedented," and "serious" (13 times each for *China Daily*).

(1) Families who have been **displaced** face extreme difficulties in maintaining basic hygiene in overcrowded shelters and displacement sites, the agency said, while critical facilities, such as health centers, community kitchens, child-protection spaces, nutrition centers, and schools, lack the necessary tools to ensure safe and sanitary conditions. This situation is likely to deteriorate further during the winter. (Infected wounds, maggots and no escape. (Gaza's humanitarian crisis hits new lows as sanitary conditions plummet. CNN 24-09-09)

(2) The leaders expressed grave concerns at the enormous loss of life, the **unprecedented** civilian casualties and the unfolding man-made humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, caused by the continuing lack of humanitarian access to civilians in need, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (Call for permanent cease-fire intensifies. *China Daily* 24-06-13)

"Displaced" is used to convey the severe impact on ordinary people in the CNN example. Meanwhile, "unprecedented" is used to elicit a sense of urgency and empathy in the *China Daily* example. In Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory, these adjectives function to evaluate human behavior and its effects as being normal or abnormal according to wider social standards. This is what Martin and White (2005) referred to as Normality, which is one subsystem of Judgement under Attitude system. For instance, in Extract 1, the term "displaced" implicitly critiques the forced migration, highlighting the infringement on basic human rights and dignity. The description of "extreme difficulties in maintaining basic hygiene" emphasizes the poor living conditions and signals a deviation from expected societal norms. Similarly, in Extract 2, the adjective "unprecedented" is used to describe the "civilian casualties," spotlighting the abnormal and unjust consequences of the conflict and inviting the moral evaluation of the actors involved. By employing Martin and White's (2005) Judgment, the discourse tries to align the audience's perspective with a specific moral viewpoint that condemns the conflict while fostering solidarity with the affected population. This approach not only critiques the actions that led to such an abnormal outcome but also calls for change by framing the situation as intolerable and extraordinary. Through the strategic use of adjectives, the writers engaged their audiences' moral reasoning and emotional responses, reinforcing the deplorable situation of ordinary Gazans and the urgency of the issue, ultimately highlighting the irrationality of war as a destructive force that disproportionately harms innocent people and perpetuates human suffering.

Abstraction involves the process of describing practices in a way that highlights their more abstract qualities, which can subsequently be elevated to an ideological framework, thereby serving the purpose of “moralizing” them (Van Leeuwen 2008). Similar to Moral Evaluation, Abstraction is also commonly utilized by both news outlets, and high frequency words also share many similarities, which can be both exemplified as “humanitarian catastrophe/crisis/tragedy” (12 times for CNN and 14 times for *China Daily*).

(3) Several people said they had been displaced from the neighborhood about 10 days ago, when the Israeli military posted on X and dropped leaflets telling people to evacuate the area for their own security. Many Gaza residents have been displaced multiple times since October, worsening the ongoing **humanitarian crisis**; experts also warn that evacuation orders have complicated aid efforts. (Nothing is left: Israel’s military tells Gaza residents to go home but they find only rubble. CNN 24-08-31)

(4) The peace deal currently under discussion calls for a three-phase process in which Hamas would release all the Israeli hostages in exchange for the Israeli forces’ withdrawal from Gaza and the release of Palestinian prisoners. Such a deal is desperately needed given the dire situation in Gaza after more than 10 months of the Israeli campaign to wipe out Hamas, which has basically devastated the territory and plunged the 2.3 million Palestinians living there into an “epic **humanitarian catastrophe**”. (Seize every cease-fire chance in Gaza: China Daily editorial. *China Daily* 24-08-20)

(5) Latest statistics from the Palestinian side show that the Palestinian death toll in the ongoing Israeli attacks on Gaza has risen to nearly 40,000. The Israel-Hamas conflict has created an unprecedented **humanitarian crisis** in Gaza. (US prioritizing self-interest at cost of any possibility of peace in Middle East: China Daily editorial. *China Daily* 24-08-19)

As can be seen from the examples above, Abstraction is mainly used by the two outlets to describe the devastating aftermath that conflict has imposed on ordinary Palestinians. However, simply characterizing the ongoing war as a “humanitarian crisis/catastrophe” fails to adequately convey why the war is destructive and how it has profoundly impacted the lives of the people in Gaza. Therefore, this characterization may violate Grice’s maxim of quantity (Bloor and Bloor 2013), which stipulates that contributions should provide adequate information relevant to the context. This lack of detail may reduce persuasiveness and clarity, leaving the audience unaware of the extent of the suffering experienced by Gaza’s population or mistrustful of the news source’s ability to convey complete or accurate information. All three extracts therefore provide information for further explanation. In Extract 3, the people of Gaza are described as being forced to leave their homes multiple times. Extract 4 highlights the prolonged duration of the conflict, while Example 5 specifies the total death toll, which at the time amounted to nearly 40,000. Additional background information is thus provided to emphasize the harsh reality that the conflict has inflicted significant suffering on ordinary Palestinians. By leveraging conversational implicature, the news media subtly challenge and undermine the perceived rationality or justification for the conflict, framing it as a fundamentally irrational and harmful endeavor.

Analogy generally functions to either validate or invalidate a particular perspective. Within this framework, the implicit response to the question of *why* does not rest on an evaluation of morality or immorality but is instead grounded in a related action associated with principles of equity or impropriety (Van Leeuwen 2008). The results generated by the Corpus Tool indicated that Analogy was only used by *China Daily*, as the typical comparative word “like” appeared five times. Meanwhile, this usage of “like” was notably absent from CNN’s reporting.

(6) “Last year, on days **like these**, I was busy hanging Ramadan decorations and preparing for shoor (predawn meal) and breakfast for several days,” the 44-year-old woman recalled. Ramadan is scheduled to begin on Monday for the Palestinians, but Al-Ashi was not even in the mood to welcome the Muslim holy month. “My children and I starve most of the time due to lack of food. I do not know how to encourage them to fast when they only find the slightest amount of food,” she lamented, referring to the practices of Islamic traditions during the holy month. The nightmare started months ago when heavy Israeli airstrikes on Gaza City took away her job and all her property and shattered her peaceful life. (Palestinians in Gaza observe joyless Ramadan under shadow of bloodshed. *China Daily* 24-03-11)

In Extract 6, Al-Ashi is portrayed as a victim of structural violence and conflict. Her contrastive personal experiences were foregrounded in the initial part of the paragraph by employing a staging strategy (Renkema and Schubert 2018), emphasizing the human cost of the war with the help of Analogy. The Israeli airstrikes were described as the direct cause of her suffering, framing Israel as the agent responsible for her loss of livelihood and well-being. This explicitly positioned the power imbalance in the narrative. Furthermore, references to the Islamic practices of Ramadan, suhoor, and fasting placed the story within a cultural and religious framework, highlighting the specific disruption to traditions that hold deep significance for the affected community. This intertextuality also enriched the narrative by connecting personal suffering to collective identity as well as comparing the peaceful Ramadans of the past with the miserable reality of the present. In the latter part of the example, the conflict was also described as a “nightmare,” using metaphor to amplify the severity of the situation and reinforcing the narrative of extreme suffering. The power of the Analogy strategy is thus strengthened through information management measures and linguistic strategies like intertextuality and metaphor several times within a single paragraph, further evoking the empathy of news readers and thereby delegitimizing the conflict.

While this section highlighted how media outlets employed Moral Evaluation to frame the conflict, the next section explores how Authorization, as a discursive strategy, contributes to shaping the legitimacy and credibility of the perspectives presented. Notably, Authorization is the second most frequent strategy used, accounting for a significant portion of the discourse in both CNN and *China Daily*. Through the use of authority, custom, and recommendations, Authorization plays a crucial role in legitimating the discourse surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict by drawing on credible sources and institutional support.

4.3 Authorization

Authorization ranked as the second most preferred approach in political news discourse, accounting for 121 instances (32.10%) in CNN and 115 instances (32.21%) in *China Daily* among the four legitimation discursive strategies. Like Moral Evaluation, Authorization also has three subcategories: Authority, Custom, and Recommendations. The significant frequency of the use of Authorization reflects its effectiveness and universality in conveying credibility and trustworthiness, making it a key mechanism in media persuasion. The provider of Authorization can also vary, including individuals, laws and regulations, and the international community.

Authority refers to the power granted to individuals, organizations, or texts based on their position or role within a particular institution. This power may also be endorsed through formal regulations and established institutions (Van Leeuwen 2008). According to the lexical analysis function of the Corpus Tool, CNN and *China Daily* tended to favor both personal and impersonal authorities to characterize the irrationality of the conflict. The most-used keywords referring to personal authority included “the UN” and “the Ministry” (38 times for CNN and 18 times for *China Daily*), and impersonal authority keywords can be represented as “law” (8 times for CNN and 6 times for *China Daily*).

(7) Mahmoud Basal, a Gaza Civil Defense spokesman, said search operations were ongoing during the rubble, with children and women among the injured. The strike drew condemnation from various officials, including the UN chief. “What’s happening in Gaza is totally unacceptable,” **UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said** in a post on X. (Israeli airstrike on Gaza school sheltering displaced people kills at least 18, including UN staff, Palestinian officials say. CNN 24-09-13)

(8) GAZA—**The Ministry of Health in Gaza said** Wednesday that the Palestinian death toll has risen to 33,482 as a result of ongoing Israeli attacks. During the past 24 hours, the Israeli army killed 122 Palestinians and wounded 56 others, bringing the total death toll to 33,482 and injuries to 76,049 since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict, **the ministry said** in a statement. (Palestinian death toll in Gaza rises to 33,482: ministry. *China Daily* 24-04-11)

In Extracts 7 and 8, the irrationality of the conflict is conveyed through what the personal authoritative source—i.e., officials from around the world—have said. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), personal authority legitimation usually takes the form of a “verbal process” clause, which is also a key component of Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2014) transitivity. Such clauses are used to illustrate the actions of speaking or communicating. This can also be seen in the above examples. In Extract 7, UN official Antonio Guterres describes the conflict as “totally unacceptable,” and in Extract 8, the Ministry of Health in Gaza has reported a significant number of casualties resulting from the ongoing conflict. Both examples quote words from these authorities either directly (Extract 7) or indirectly (Extract 8) to describe the devastating casualties and extensive harm done to civilians, resulting in the widespread loss of life and severe physical and psychological damage. The quotations are used to obscure the journalists’ personal stances (Reisigl and Wodak 2016), meaning that journalists do not convey legitimacy statements as directly as in editorials, thereby promoting the perceived objectivity of the report. The use of expert sources is also a crucial strategy for ensuring transparency, further enabling journalists to portray their reports as objective and reliable and mitigating potential reporter bias (Vos and Craft 2017). By relying on expert sources to describe the devastating effects of the conflict (such as casualties and psychological trauma), the news reports thus shape public understanding. They direct attention to the harm caused to civilians and emphasize the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. This framing impacts how the public perceives the irrationality of the conflict, potentially generating support for peace efforts or a reevaluation of the conflict. The use of authoritative voices is a powerful tool in shaping public opinion and framing the moral and ethical implications of the conflict.

(9) The IDF [Israel Defense Forces] said earlier that “numerous steps were taken to mitigate the risk of harming civilians,” saying the incident was “a further example of the Hamas terrorist organization’s systematic abuse of civilian infrastructure **in violation of international law.**” (Israeli airstrike on Gaza school sheltering displaced people kills at least 18, including UN staff, Palestinian officials say. CNN 24-09-13)

(10) Over 2 million people are living in what amounts to an open-air prison, without adequate access to water, electricity, food, medication, and fuel. This man-made humanitarian disaster and **the serious breach of international law** must end. (Palestinian space being single-mindedly squeezed: *China Daily* editorial. *China Daily* 24-07-04)

Both the above examples rely on impersonal authority—that of law—to illustrate the profound impact of war

on the populace and thereby undermine its justification. This illegitimacy of the conflict being conveyed can be understood through Renkema and Schubert's (2018) Functional Sentence Perspective theory, which examines the sequential arrangement and informational significance of various sentence components. Renkema and Schubert identify three primary types of thematic progression patterns within a text, two of which can be found in the above extracts. In Extract 9, the first sentence takes IDF as its subject. The rheme introduces the IDF's purported efforts to "mitigate the risk of harming civilians," incorporating the presupposition that conflict has a high risk of harming civilians. The subject of the second clause remains the IDF, and the rheme further asserts that Hamas' action of launching a strike violates international law. This progression is a continuous pattern, which creates a cohesive, harmonious narrative. In Extract 10, the theme of the first sentence is ordinary people, and the rheme illustrates their current situation with the simile "what amounts to an open-air prison." Givón's (1989) Code Quantity Principle, which suggests that more information is encoded linguistically when a message is less predictable or requires additional emphasis, is applicable here in the enhancement of the simile through the addition of specific details like "without adequate access to water, electricity." The rheme of the first sentence then becomes the theme of the second, and this time the issue is that "This man-made humanitarian disaster and serious breach of international law," clearly reflecting the reporter's stance. The rheme of the second sentence also contains one modal verb of obligation, "must," suggesting that the focus or new information (rheme) in the sentence conveys a necessity or requirement. This emphasizes the importance of the action or idea being expressed. Impersonal authority is thus assisted by functional words that guide readers' understanding of the central argument, particularly the illegitimacy of the ongoing conflict. The use of different thematic progression patterns also effectively shapes the presentation of information, guiding readers through a cohesive and persuasive narrative that underscores the illegitimacy of the conflict and strengthens the argument's overall impact.

In the context of Conformity (a subcategory of Custom), the response to *why*-questions is typically "Because that is what most people do" or "Because everyone else is doing it." The underlying implication is that, given the widespread engagement in a particular behavior or action, there is an expectation or encouragement for individuals to adopt the same conduct (Van Leeuwen 2008). Judging from the data, Conformity is only preferred by *China Daily*, which focuses especially on "the world" or "international community" (14 times).

(11) Peace Now, an Israel-based settlement watchdog, reportedly said on Wednesday that the Israeli authorities have approved the appropriation of 12.7 square kilometers of land in the occupied West Bank, marking the largest single appropriation in about three decades. Israeli settlements in the West Bank have for years been a major obstacle to resolving the decades-long Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Palestinians view the settlements as preventing any possibility of a cohesive state, and most members of **the international community** consider the settlements the main barrier to any lasting peace agreement. (Palestinian space being single-mindedly squeezed: China Daily editorial. *China Daily* 24-07-04)

(12) This man-made humanitarian disaster and serious breach of international law must end, and Israel must heed **the international community's** call to ensure the rapid and safe entry of humanitarian supplies into Gaza. (Palestinian space being single-mindedly squeezed: China Daily editorial. *China Daily* 24-07-04)

As can be seen from the examples above, *China Daily* favors the expression "international community" to illustrate the fact that the Israeli authority refuses to achieve a peaceful cease-fire agreement, is ignoring

international opinion, and is not adhering to global expectations. In both cases, the “international community” serves as a collective, authoritative voice demanding that Israel comply with global expectations—whether in terms of halting settlement expansion or allowing humanitarian aid. These examples reflect one key presupposition that Israel’s actions are not in alignment with the broader views and expectations of the international community, and that there is a widespread call for Israel to change its policies. *China Daily* emphasizes this point by using the word “must” in Extract 12, asserting that Israel should comply with the demands of global society. Furthermore, these two excerpts are selected from the same editorial, with Extract 11 representing the first two paragraphs of the text and Extract 12 representing the last two. This illustrates the head-tail principle, as the information is positioned at the beginning and end of the discourse. According to Renkema and Schubert (2018), information located toward the head or tail of a text tends to be more significant and foregrounded. As a consequence, both examples demonstrate and also highlight how Israeli actions do not conform to global expectations and express the global desire for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, conveying the overt message that Israel’s actions are a major barrier to global peace, and that it should instead heed the call from international society to help ensure world peace.

Following the discussion of Authorization as a prominent strategy in establishing legitimacy through authoritative sources, the next section shifts focus to Rationalization, which also plays a significant role in shaping the legitimacy of the conflict. While Authorization emphasizes trust in authoritative voices, Rationalization legitimizes actions by framing them as either justified or morally aligned with accepted principles.

4.4 Rationalization

The Rationalization legitimation strategy was evenly distributed across the two news outlets, with CNN and *China Daily* employing it 113 and 111 times (corresponding to 29.97% and 31.09% of their total occurrences), respectively. Van Leeuwen (2008) identifies two primary subcategories within the strategy: Instrumental and Theoretical Rationalization, which are both frequently utilized in the comparative corpora. Both news outlets thus tended to emphasize the brutal consequences of the conflict to undermine its legitimacy. Furthermore, any resort to force was portrayed as inconsistent with moral principles and the trajectory of human societal development.

Instrumental Rationalization emphasizes the outcomes of actions. From this perspective, effect is viewed retrospectively as something recognized after the fact, rather than as a concept that was (or could have been) deliberately planned (Van Leeuwen 2008). The wordlist generated using the Corpus Tool assisted in identifying the most frequent terms associated with this strategy, which can be exemplified in the examples of “destroy” and “kill” (55 times for CNN and 39 times for *China Daily*), as exemplified in some of the headlines used for articles.

(13) All the streets were **destroyed**: Palestinians count the cost as Israel pulls back from Jenin. (CNN 24-09-06)

(14) Israeli airstrike on Gaza school sheltering displaced people **kills** at least 18, including UN staff, Palestinian officials say. (CNN 24-09-13)

(15) 30 Palestinians **killed** in Israeli overnight airstrikes in Gaza: Sources. (*China Daily* 24-03-04)

Headlines are powerful framing tools in journalism that set the tone and perspective of a news story. They guide readers’ interpretations, emphasizing certain elements while downplaying others. As Graber and Dunaway (2014)

note, headlines are the primary entry point for readers, shaping their expectations and perceptions of the content that follows. As a result, headlines are crucial tools for news outlets to effectively communicate their perspectives to audiences. Extracts 13-15 are headlines selected from the two corpora. In all the three examples, the suffering of the Palestinian people is highlighted with the help of what Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) called material-process clauses. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), clauses that contain material processes typically represent unfolding, dynamic, physical actions and include the process of action with an agent and its relevant goals. In the selected examples, the Israeli airstrike is described as the agent, and its action involved several goals including “the streets,” “displaced people,” and “Palestinians.” The Israeli attack is thus placed at the forefront of the reports, and the severe consequences of the conflict are also emphasized even before the readers reach the main content of the articles. By foregrounding the agent (the Israeli strike) and its direct impact on the Palestinians, the headlines not only narrate events but also evoke emotional responses and highlight the power dynamics within the conflict. This supports Van Dijk’s (2013) framing of media discourse as a tool for shaping societal narratives and reinforcing specific ideological perspectives. Consequently, the headlines analyzed do more than summarize content; they actively construct a perspective that emphasizes the suffering caused by the conflict, potentially influencing public sentiment and discourse surrounding the issue.

Within the framework of Theoretical Rationalization, legitimation is grounded through an alignment with a perceived truth or an accepted understanding of “the way things are” (Van Leeuwen 2008). This form of Rationalization is closely linked to the concept of naturalization, where one activity is frequently framed in relation to another, often bearing moral or immoral implications. Several extracts effectively demonstrate this strategy, particularly through the use of the high-frequency words “need,” “must,” and “should” (16 times for CNN and 31 times for *China Daily*).

(16) “These dramatic violations of international humanitarian law **need to stop** now.” His spokesman, Stéphane Dujarric, added on Thursday that “the IDF stated that they had targeted a command-and-control center in the compound. This incident **must be** independently and thoroughly investigated to **ensure accountability**”. (Israeli airstrike on Gaza school sheltering displaced people kills at least 18, including UN staff, Palestinian officials say. CNN 24-09-13)

(17) With the war in Gaza showing multiple signs of spilling over and involving more players in the region, Tel Aviv **should** exercise more restraint and stop **making any irresponsible moves** that may exacerbate confrontation and enmity with the Palestinian side. It **should** fulfill its obligations under international humanitarian law and fully implement the United Nations Security Council resolutions on expanding humanitarian access and implementing an immediate cease-fire in Gaza. (Palestinian space being single-mindedly squeezed: China Daily editorial. *China Daily* 24-07-04)

In the first sentence of Extract 16, opinions toward the Israeli airstrike on the Gazan school were conveyed by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in which three types of legitimation strategies were used collectively in a single proposition. In the first sentence of Extract 16, “dramatic” is an adjective that falls under the category of Moral Evaluation, while the phrase “violations of international humanitarian law” belongs to Authority and “need to stop” is Rationalization. This collaborative use of legitimation strategies enhances the statement’s persuasiveness, credibility, and emotional-cognitive impact. It allows the speaker to frame the issue more powerfully to highlight the severity of the conflict. Renkema and Schubert (2018) suggest that topic identification can be achieved using three primary linguistic approaches, among which word frequency proves to be the most

effective. The central idea of a text tends to be repeated multiple times, thereby becoming more prominent. In Extracts 16 and 17, Theoretical Rationalization resources that indicate the “irrationality” and “unnaturalness” of the Israeli actions—as well as modal verbs expressing obligation—both occur three times within a single paragraph. One topic of the selected examples can thus be identified as the “unaccountability” and “irresponsibility” of the Israeli airstrikes, thereby reinforcing through linguistic power the idea that Israel is supposed to act more rationally. By repeatedly highlighting these terms, the discourse frames these actions as unjustifiable and misaligned with moral or societal expectations. This recurrent framing creates a cumulative effect, reinforcing a critique of Israeli actions while advocating for closer adherence to moral principles.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Discourse functions as a site of power and struggle by shaping how conflicts are initiated, perceived, and sustained through the construction of meaning. Drawing on Foucault’s (1980) theory of power/knowledge, discourse is not just a reflection of reality but a mechanism through which power defines what is considered legitimate or true. In the context of war, political and media discourses establish dominant narratives that justify certain actions while suppressing alternative viewpoints. CDA theorists like Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1998) argue that discourse both reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, enabling powerful actors to shape public opinion by framing conflicts in ways that serve their interests. With this critical perspective, CDA offers an ideal framework for analyzing political discourse in news media, as it uncovers the power dynamics, ideological structures, and strategies that influence public perception. This study thus employed CDA to explore how political news discourse disseminates ideas and shapes public opinion.

Research question one surrounded the similarities and differences in how news outlets utilize legitimation discursive strategies. Based on the data of the distribution information presented above, it can be concluded that both outlets used macrolevel legitimation discursive strategies in a similar pattern despite slight differences in frequency. Evaluation was the most frequently employed strategy by both outlets, with CNN using this strategy 138 times (36.60% of its total strategies), and *China Daily* implementing it 123 times (34.45% of its strategy usage). Authorization followed closely. CNN applied this approach 121 times (32.10% of its total strategy usage), while *China Daily* utilized it 115 times (32.21% of its overall strategy usage). Moral Rationalization was also a widely used strategy, with CNN employing it 113 times (29.97% of its total strategy use), and *China Daily* applying it 111 times (31.09%). Finally, Mythopoesis was the least favored strategy, with CNN incorporating it only five times (1.33%) and *China Daily* eight times (2.25%), indicating that both outlets rarely used storytelling for legitimation. In total, CNN employed these strategies 377 times, while *China Daily* applied them 357 times. Overall, these statistics suggest that both CNN and *China Daily* primarily focus on using authoritative sources, moral judgment, and rational arguments to delegitimize conflict, while rarely relying on mythopoetic narratives. The predominant use of negative language and the similar strategic distributions between the two outlets further underscore their shared anti-war stance.

Research question two asked how the different news outlets (de)legitimized a controversial conflict and expressed their stances through their reports. Overall, the message conveyed by both CNN and *China Daily* regarding the Israel-Hamas war was consistent: the war was deemed illegitimate, and its consequences include severe casualties and economic losses, offering no benefits whatsoever. Both CNN and *China Daily* preferred to describe the seriousness of the conflict, and the suffering of Palestinian civilians was highlighted with the help of various evaluative adjectives that fell into the Moral Evaluation category. The terms used by both news media to

describe the conflict were not merely specific but also some abstract ones like “crisis” and “catastrophe,” elevating the dangers and severeness of the conflict to a level of Abstraction, another Moral Evaluation subcategory. Furthermore, both outlets favored the usage of either personal or impersonal Authority (an Authorization category) to emphasize the fact that Israel’s actions significantly violate international law. It is worth noting that Israel itself has invoked legal arguments, framing Hamas’ attacks as violations of international law as illustrated in example 9. While the primary aim for the Israelis may be to justify their airstrikes on Gaza’s schools, their overarching message is that the origin of the conflict (i.e., the October 7 attack) was fundamentally unlawful, even though Israel has itself chosen to resort to unlawful measures in response. Their argument is that illegal and inhumane behavior will necessarily lead to heavy casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, a form of Instrumental Rationalization. Even if a ceasefire is argued to align with reason and the natural course of development, and Israel’s attacks also require explanation as the action of launching war is never accountable (Rationalization: Theoretical Rationalization).

However, there were also subtle differences between CNN and *China Daily* in their use of certain subcategories, with *China Daily* favoring some strategies that were unused by CNN. Specifically, *China Daily* excels at contrasting the horrors of the current conflict with the peaceful years of the past to further emphasize the devastating impact of conflict on societal stability and humanity’s collective progress, reinforcing the necessity of peace through historical reflection and moral reasoning (Moral Evaluation: Analogy). *China Daily* also emphasizes the international community in a use of Conformity Authorization, stressing several times that Israel’s refusal to cease fire goes against the calls of the international community and deviates from the behaviors expected by the world. *China Daily* thus positioned itself as a supporter of international consensus, reinforcing its image as a responsible global voice committed to a values-driven approach to reporting and to China’s diplomatic stance as an advocate for peace and stability. The absence of these strategies in CNN’s coverage indicates that CNN has prioritized immediate, fact-based reporting over moral or historical reasoning. This reflects a more event-driven, pragmatic approach to journalism.

The observed differences in reporting strategies between CNN and *China Daily* may be attributed to distinct cultural norms and media practices in the United States and China. American media outlets, such as CNN, often prioritize immediacy and objective reporting, focusing on delivering timely news updates with an emphasis on factual accuracy (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). In contrast, Chinese media, exemplified by *China Daily*, tend to adopt a more collectivist approach, aligning with broader societal values that emphasize harmony, historical continuity, and international consensus (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). This approach is especially evident in *China Daily*’s use of analogies contrasting past peace with current conflict and its emphasis on international community perspectives. These strategies reflect a media framework that supports social cohesion and aligns with governmental narratives (Liu 2018).

This study examines how CNN and *China Daily* legitimize or delegitimize the Israel-Hamas conflict, revealing both shared humanitarian concerns and divergent rhetorical strategies shaped by differing cultural and political contexts. The findings support Entman’s (1993) framing theory, which posits that media selectively highlight aspects of a conflict to define problems, assign blame, and propose solutions, thereby shaping public perception and policy discourse. The mutual emphasis on civilian suffering aligns with global human rights discourse and reflects the media’s role in cultivating a collective moral consciousness (Fairclough 1995). At the same time, differences in framing—such as *China Daily*’s use of historical analogies and appeals to international consensus—underscore how national ideologies and institutional contexts shape media narratives, consistent with Wodak and Meyer’s (2015) discourse-historical approach. These findings also highlight the dual role of media as both a tool for reinforcing dominant power structures and a site for contestation (Van Dijk 2006), reflecting the complex

interplay between global narratives and local ideological imperatives.

Nevertheless, the study is limited in scope, focusing solely on American and Chinese media perspectives, with particular emphasis on anti-war sentiments and the delegitimization of violence. To develop a more nuanced and balanced account of war discourse, future research should include media coverage from both parties involved in the conflict, especially examining how Israeli media employs legitimating strategies to justify military actions. Such an approach would deepen our understanding of how competing narratives are constructed, contested, and disseminated across different geopolitical contexts.

The observed convergence in humanitarian framing suggests the emergence of transnational discursive patterns, contributing to what Habermas (1984) describes as a global public sphere for rational-critical debate. Conversely, the persistence of culturally embedded legitimation strategies reinforces Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, illustrating how media texts are shaped by ideological contexts and interpreted through culturally specific lenses. Ultimately, this study underscores the media's active role not as neutral conveyors of information but as influential actors in framing conflict, mediating legitimacy, and shaping global public perceptions.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Secondary