

## The Telegram Files: Online Discourse, Narrative Construction, and Public Engagement in the Zayn Rayyan Case

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### ABSTRACT

Online discourse is a fundamental aspect of digital participation, allowing netizens to freely express their views and interpretations of current events. In the context of criminal incidents unfolding in real time, online platforms often attract extensive public engagement, with individuals contributing their own perceptions, assumptions, and narratives at various stages of the case. In today's digital age, such participation has become a social norm, where criminal cases are not only reported but also actively discussed, debated, and reconstructed by online communities. As a result, each case develops its own distinctive online discourse, shaped by the unique interactions, interpretations, and dynamics of digital audiences. This study examines how citizen-led disclosures on Telegram shape public understanding of ongoing criminal investigations, using the Zayn Rayyan case in Malaysia as a critical case study. Drawing on a qualitative design combining paper tracing analysis, discourse analysis, and netnography, the study analyses three layers of data: Telegram exposés (Edisi Siasat), mainstream media reports, and netizens' online comments. The findings reveal the emergence of "shadow narratives", unverified but widely circulated interpretations that gain legitimacy through repetition and emotional resonance rather than legal validation. These narratives operate within a "gray communication field," where encrypted and semi-private platforms blur boundaries between public and private communication. The study demonstrates how such environments challenge traditional Gatekeeping Theory, reconfigure Public Sphere dynamics, and contribute to affect-driven forms of public judgment. The paper argues that viral, networked investigations are reshaping epistemic authority in digital culture, particularly in non-Western contexts.

**Keywords:** *Telegram, viral leaks, social media, online discourse, Zaynn Rayyan.*

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally transformed the reporting, interpretation, and contestation of criminal cases. In contemporary media ecosystems, information about high-profile cases often emerges on digital platforms before verification by authorities or traditional news outlets. This phenomenon reflects a broader shift in public engagement with media, where audiences are no longer passive consumers but active participants in the production and circulation of knowledge (Jenkins, 2006; Couldry, 2012). Globally, social media has increasingly shaped public discourse around sensitive issues such as crime and justice. Unlike legacy media, which operates under editorial oversight and legal constraints, social media platforms such as Telegram facilitate rapid, anonymous, and wide-

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reaching dissemination of information. This dynamic has led to a new pattern in which criminal cases attract public attention primarily through online exposure, sometimes preceding mainstream media coverage. Research in Western contexts has highlighted how digital platforms enable the formation of “shadow narratives” that compete with official accounts, influencing public perception and collective meaning-making (Papacharissi, 2015).

In Malaysia, the landscape has evolved markedly over the past two decades. High-profile cases involving minors, such as the Nurin Jazlin and Sharlinie cases, were traditionally mediated through mainstream news and police statements (Sinar Harian, 2024), as digital infrastructure was limited back then in 2007 -2008 based on the researcher’s observation. By 2025, however, widespread internet access has allowed current social issues from bullying to systemic injustice to gain viral attention via platforms like Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and Facebook. This shift has fostered a culture of digital accountability, where netizens actively engage with societal concerns. Public figures and social media influencers in general, have leveraged these platforms to highlight issues and tag law enforcement authorities, occasionally eliciting real-world responses especially in video contents. This could be seen through posting of youtube videos, tiktok videos on the Zayn Rayyan’s case interpreting their own point of view of the case.

Telegram, in particular, has emerged as a fast-growing platform in Malaysia, offering free, rapid messaging and high degrees of anonymity. Channels like *Edisi Siasat* which established in the year of 2020 operate as independent watchdogs, disseminating claims of misconduct, abuse of power, and corruption among Malaysian officials (Jaafar, 2021). One of its most widely discussed disclosures involved an alleged police report concerning the murder of six-year-old autistic boy Zayn Rayyan, including claims that his parents had confessed to the crime. The case garnered national attention as the court proceedings and investigative findings unfolded, aligning in part with the initial claims circulated online. Part of the intense public speculation surrounding the case stemmed from its initial circumstances, as the victim was first reported missing by his own parents before his body was later discovered. This sequence of events attracted significant media attention and public interest, transforming the case into a highly emotive and widely discussed issue. The transition from a missing-person report to a murder investigation (New Straits Times, 2025) heightened public scrutiny of the parents and contributed to the development of competing narratives, rumours, and allegations across both traditional and social media platforms

Against this backdrop, this study examines how citizen-led information sharing on Telegram shapes public perception and discourse around ongoing criminal investigations in Malaysia. Focusing on the Zayn Rayyan case, the study is guided by two primary objectives. First, it seeks to examine how narratives surrounding the Zayn Rayyan case were constructed, disseminated, and transformed across Telegram exposés, mainstream media reports, and court-related reporting. By comparing allegations circulated through alternative media with information presented in institutional and legal sources, the study explores how competing interpretations of the case emerged, evolved, and gained legitimacy. Second, the study aims to investigate how netizens engaged with, interpreted, and negotiated these narratives through online discourse. In doing so, it explores how public participation in digital environments contributes to the shaping of collective understanding, public judgment, and the changing dynamics of information authority in the digital age.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Social Media and Crime Reporting*

In the evolving digital communication environment, social media has increasingly reshaped public understandings of criminal incidents. Early scholarship highlighted the ability of social media platforms to facilitate rapid information dissemination, user participation, and the circulation of news beyond traditional journalistic gatekeeping (Bruns, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Papacharissi, 2015). However, with the evolution of platforms and changes in user behavior, more and more major criminal cases first attracted public attention through social media, and were then "confirmed" or "tracked" by mainstream media. This "reverse reporting" phenomenon has triggered a profound reflection on the relationship between traditional media gatekeeper theory and public communication behavior.

Traditional gatekeeping theory positions journalists and media institutions as the primary actors responsible for selecting, filtering, and disseminating information to the public (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). However, the rise of social media has transformed information flows by enabling ordinary users to participate in the production, circulation, and interpretation of news content. In digital environments, audiences are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants who contribute to agenda formation, content sharing, and meaning-making processes (Jenkins, 2006). This shift has prompted scholars to reconsider conventional understandings of gatekeeping and to explore how information control operates within networked communication systems.

One influential response to this transformation is the concept of networked gatekeeping, which argues that information flows are increasingly shaped by interactions among institutional actors, platform infrastructures, and networked publics rather than by journalists alone (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). In such environments, authority over information becomes more distributed, creating opportunities for citizen participation while simultaneously raising questions about credibility, accountability, and legitimacy. The circulation of information surrounding the Zayn Rayyan case illustrates these tensions, as public discussions on social media and messaging platforms often developed alongside, and at times ahead of, mainstream media coverage.

While social media has been widely praised for facilitating rapid information dissemination and expanding opportunities for public participation, scholars have also highlighted the challenges associated with verifying information in highly networked environments. The speed of online communication can amplify rumours, speculation, and emotionally driven interpretations before facts are fully established (Papacharissi, 2015). As affective expressions increasingly shape online engagement, public discussions may be influenced by emotional responses and collective sentiments rather than evidence-based reasoning. Consequently, the growing role of networked publics in shaping narratives around criminal cases raises important questions about how information credibility is assessed and negotiated in contemporary digital communication.

Although social media can enhance democratic participation by enabling broader public engagement in matters of public concern, it may also complicate legal and investigative processes when unverified claims circulate widely online. Scholars have noted that the visibility and speed of digital communication can contribute to trial-by-media dynamics, public speculation, and reputational consequences for individuals involved in ongoing investigations (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015). In the Zayn Rayyan case, discussions and allegations circulating through Telegram and other social media platforms

generated significant public attention, illustrating how networked communication can influence public perceptions even before formal judicial processes have reached a conclusion.

### *Telegram as a Platform*

Compared with public social networking platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), Telegram operates through a distinct communication architecture that shapes how information is produced, circulated, and consumed. Its combination of encrypted messaging, large-scale channels and groups, pseudonymous participation, and limited content moderation has enabled the platform to become an important space for the dissemination of sensitive and controversial information (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020; Rogers, 2020). These features provide users with greater control over communication and facilitate the rapid circulation of information outside traditional media institutions.

Existing scholarship has primarily examined Telegram's role in political mobilization, alternative information networks, and the circumvention of censorship (Rogers, 2020; Jones, 2023). However, its function as a platform for the circulation and public discussion of information relating to criminal cases remains underexplored. On one hand, Telegram's architecture can provide a relatively secure environment for whistleblowers, citizen informants, and alternative voices to share information. On the other hand, the platform's channel-based broadcasting mechanisms allow information, rumours, and allegations to spread rapidly across networked communities with limited editorial oversight.

Unlike algorithmically curated social media platforms, Telegram relies heavily on user-driven subscription networks and community-based dissemination practices. As a result, the visibility and credibility of information are often shaped by the perceived trustworthiness of channel administrators and the collective dynamics of participating communities rather than by platform algorithms. This study argues that Telegram functions as a “gray communication field” situated between public and private communication spaces. In this hybrid environment, information can circulate beyond the constraints of traditional gatekeeping while simultaneously raising important questions regarding credibility, legitimacy, verification, and public trust.

### *Challenges and Ethics*

As social media increasingly serves as a primary venue for the circulation and discussion of criminal cases, the ethical and legal challenges arising from these practices have become more complex and pressing. Scholars have noted that the rapid dissemination of unverified information, unauthorized disclosures, and online speculation can shape public perceptions of ongoing investigations, potentially undermining due process, infringing upon individual privacy, and complicating the distinction between factual evidence and public opinion (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Despite growing scholarly attention to these issues, there remains no unified theoretical framework capable of fully integrating the ethical, legal, and communicative tensions generated by networked platforms. Existing research has largely focused on describing the phenomenon of online misinformation and participatory communication, while offering limited explanations of the mechanisms through which platform structures, user behaviour, and institutional actors interact to shape information credibility and public judgment.

Communication ethics has traditionally emphasized the public's right to know, while simultaneously stressing professional responsibilities such as accuracy, accountability, and the minimization of harm (Ward, 2018). However, within social media environments,

information producers are often ordinary users rather than trained journalists and are therefore not necessarily bound by established professional norms. In high-profile criminal cases, the circulation of personal information, photographs, and unverified allegations may be justified by users as efforts to seek justice or uncover the truth, yet such practices can result in privacy violations and secondary victimization. These developments challenge long-standing ethical principles concerning harm reduction and responsible communication.

A further tension concerns the ways in which users access information credibility in digital environments. Research suggests that online engagement is frequently shaped by emotions, personal beliefs, and group identities rather than by formal standards of evidence or verification (Papacharissi, 2015). As emotionally charged narratives gain visibility and traction, public interpretations of criminal cases may diverge from the evidentiary standards required by legal institutions. This creates a fundamental tension between networked public discourse and the procedural principles that underpin judicial decision-making.

Moreover, misinformation surrounding criminal cases is often legitimized through collective endorsement, repeated sharing, and emotionally resonant narratives. Within highly participatory online environments, claims may acquire credibility through social validation rather than factual verification, contributing to what can be understood as forms of "emotional justice" that operate independently of formal legal processes (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015). Consequently, social media platforms have become important sites where competing interpretations of justice, truth, and legitimacy are negotiated and contested.

### *Case Studies*

In addition to the Zayn Rayyan case, several high-profile criminal investigations demonstrate how social media has increasingly functioned as a form of "pre-exposure mechanism" in contemporary information environments. The 2021 Gabby Petito case in the United States attracted global attention through the collective efforts of TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube users, whose analysis of publicly available content generated widespread public engagement and contributed to ongoing discussions surrounding the investigation. Similarly, the murder of Sarah Everard in the United Kingdom sparked extensive online discussions concerning women's safety, gender-based violence, and institutional accountability. These cases illustrate how social media platforms can mobilize public attention, amplify civic participation, and shape public discourse surrounding criminal justice issues.

Such developments suggest that traditional hierarchies of information authority are increasingly being challenged by networked forms of communication. In conventional crime reporting, law enforcement agencies and mainstream news organizations have historically served as primary gatekeepers responsible for verifying and disseminating information. However, in digital environments, eyewitness accounts, user-generated content, online communities, and citizen-led investigations frequently emerge as early sources of information and interpretation. This shift reflects broader transformations in participatory culture and networked communication, where audiences increasingly contribute to the production, circulation, and evaluation of information (Jenkins, 2006; Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

At the same time, public engagement with criminal cases is not driven solely by rational deliberation. Online discussions are often shaped by emotions, collective identities, and affective responses that influence how information is interpreted, shared, and legitimized (Papacharissi, 2015). As emotionally resonant narratives gain visibility, authority is

increasingly negotiated through public participation and social validation rather than through institutional expertise alone. Consequently, understanding contemporary crime-related discourse requires examining not only information flows but also the interplay between emotion, credibility, and authority within networked publics.

When official information is perceived as delayed, incomplete, or inaccessible, social media users may interpret institutional silence as evidence of secrecy or incompetence, intensifying public scrutiny and moral judgment. The Gabby Petito case illustrates how citizen-led investigations and online engagement can generate substantial public pressure for continued institutional action and media attention. Such developments raise important questions about the relationship between networked participation and procedural justice, particularly when public opinion develops more rapidly than formal investigative processes.

### Theoretical Framework

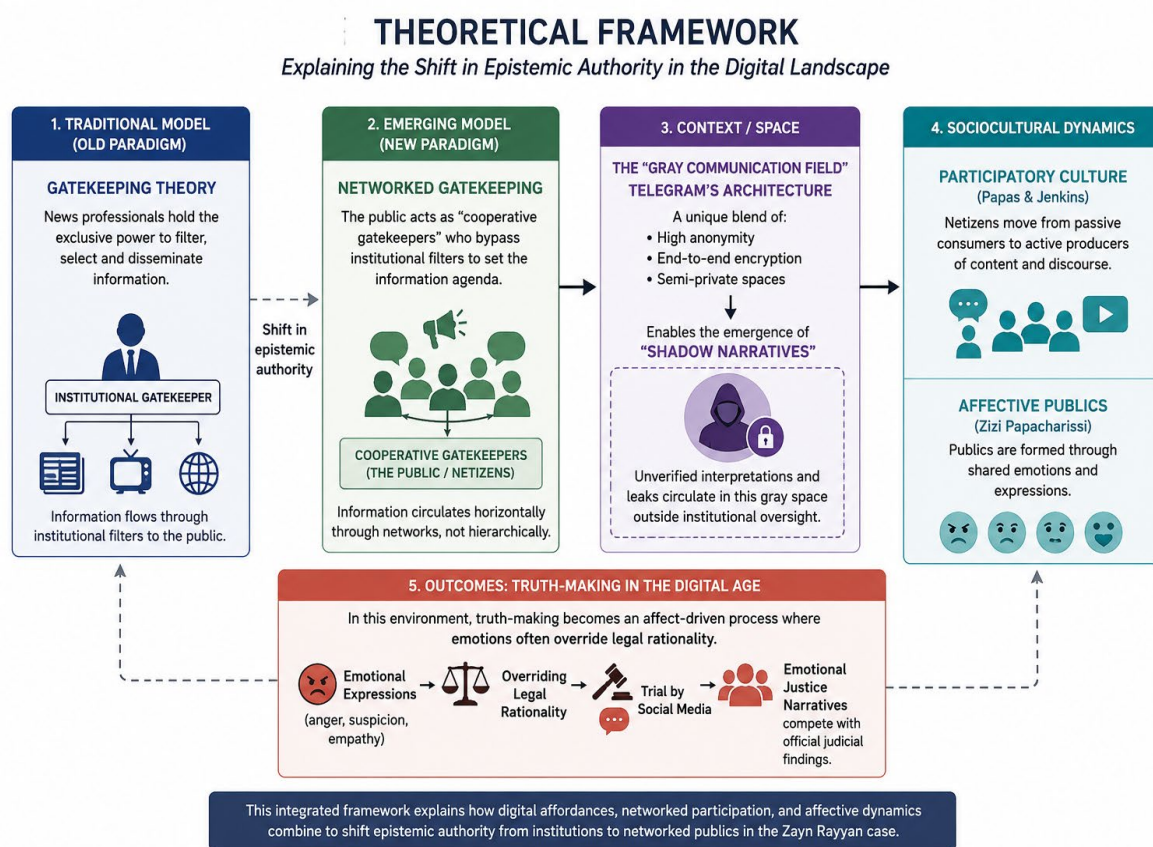


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of the study

The theoretical framework for this study integrates several communication and sociological models to explain the shift in epistemic authority within the digital landscape (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2016; Papacharissi, 2015; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). At its core, the paper challenges traditional Gatekeeping Theory, which historically granted news professionals the exclusive power to filter information. In the context of the Zayn Rayyan case, this model is replaced by "networked gatekeeping," where the public acts as "cooperative gatekeepers" who bypass institutional filters to set the information agenda. This process occurs within a "gray communication field" a term used to describe Telegram's unique architectural blend of

high anonymity and end-to-end encryption which provides a semi-private space for the emergence of "shadow narratives". These unverified interpretations gain legitimacy through rapid networked repetition and emotional resonance rather than formal legal validation. Furthermore, the study draws on the theories of Participatory Culture and Affective Publics to explain how netizens transition from passive consumers to active producers of discourse. In this environment, truth-making becomes an affect-driven process where emotional expressions such as anger, suspicion, and empathy often override legal rationality, leading to a "trial by social media" and the formation of "emotional justice" narratives that compete directly with official judicial findings.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), focusing on how narratives surrounding a high-profile legal case are constructed, reframed, and contested across two domains: (1) investigative exposés on *Edisi Siasat Telegram* versus court findings as reported by mainstream media, and (2) public perceptions reflected in netizens' online discourse. The case study design is appropriate as it enables an in-depth, contextualized exploration of a bounded phenomenon (Stake, 1995).

The central method employed is document analysis, a qualitative approach that examines documents as social artefacts and traces how information moves across institutional and non-institutional sources. This approach allows the researcher to map the trajectory of allegations, facts, and frames, examining how they first appear, how they are reshaped in subsequent texts, and how they circulate into public debate (Bowen, 2009).

Table 1: Mapping trajectory of the data

Data Layer	Source of Data	Unit of Analysis	Analytical Focus	Purpose
<b>Dataset 1: Allegations and Court Findings</b>	Edisi Siasat Telegram posts and mainstream media reports covering court proceedings and legal developments	Allegations, evidence claims, screenshots, court findings, judicial statements, and media narratives	Comparison of allegations circulated through Telegram with court findings reported in mainstream media; identification of overlaps, contradictions, omissions, narrative framing, attribution of blame, and legitimisation processes	To examine how allegations and alternative narratives were constructed in Telegram and how these narratives were subsequently reinforced, challenged, or contradicted through court findings and mainstream media reporting.
<b>Dataset 2: Netizens' Discourse and Public Sense- Making</b>	Facebook comments and discussions on Sinar Harian's Facebook page	User comments, replies, discussions, reactions	Analysis of narrative adoption, resistance, reinterpretation, emotional expressions, speculation, trust, and public sense-making	To examine how netizens engaged with, negotiated, and responded to competing narratives originating from Telegram allegations and court- related media reports.

<b>Cross-Dataset Comparative Analysis</b>	Telegram posts, mainstream media reports, and Facebook discussions	Narratives across both datasets	Identification of narrative diffusion, transformation, amplification, contestation, emotional framing, and legitimacy-building processes	To trace how narratives evolved from initial allegations to institutional reporting and subsequently shaped public discourse surrounding the Zayn Rayyan case.
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By triangulating across these two datasets, the study traces how allegations and narratives circulate between Telegram, mainstream media, and public discourse, providing insights into the construction, legitimisation, contestation, and reinterpretation of competing knowledge claims across alternative media, judicial reporting, and networked publics.

### *Sampling and Data Collection*

Table 2: Sample of posts from *Edisi Siasat*

Data Source	Sampling Strategy	Data Collection Method	Purpose
<b>Dataset 1: Telegram Posts and Mainstream Media Reports</b>	Purposive sampling was employed to select Edisi Siasat Telegram posts and Sinar Harian news articles directly related to the Zayn Rayyan case. Telegram posts were selected based on their relevance to allegations, evidence claims, and narrative construction. For mainstream media coverage, a total of nine Sinar Harian articles were selected, comprising the three most-engaged articles from 2024, three from 2025, and three from 2026.	Telegram posts were archived through screenshots and transcripts, while news articles were collected and archived from Sinar Harian's online platform.	To compare allegations and alternative narratives circulated through Telegram with court findings and institutional narratives reported by mainstream media, and to identify areas of convergence, divergence, omission, and narrative transformation.
<b>Dataset 2: Netizens' Discourse</b>	Comments associated with the selected Sinar Harian news articles were purposively sampled based on their relevance to discussions surrounding the case.	Comments were extracted using a Facebook comment scraper and stored for thematic analysis.	To examine how netizens adopted, resisted, negotiated, and reinterpreted narratives emerging from Telegram allegations and mainstream media reports, as well as how public meaning-making developed throughout the case.

A purposive sample of posts from *Edisi Siasat* relating to the case was archived using screenshots and transcripts. These posts were selected based on their relevance to the case and their potential to provide insight into the construction and dissemination of information surrounding the incident.

In addition, online news articles published by *Sinar Harian* were selected for analysis. A total of nine articles were sampled, comprising the top three most-engaged postings from 2024, three postings from 2025, and three postings from 2026. This sampling strategy was employed to examine the trajectory and evolution of media coverage of the case over time. Public comments associated with these news reports were extracted from Facebook using a Facebook comment scraper. Although the comments were posted on a publicly accessible Facebook page, the anonymity of all commenters will be strictly protected. No identifying information, including usernames, profile names, or profile photographs, will be disclosed in the study. The extracted comments will be used solely for research purposes and analysed in accordance with established ethical research guidelines.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university's research ethics committee prior to data collection. The research proposal underwent review by two independent ethics reviewers and was approved on the condition that all personal identifiers of social media users remain confidential and are excluded from all publications, reports, and presentations arising from the study.

#### *a) Data Analysis*

The collected data were coded and analysed thematically using Google NotebookLM, an AI-assisted research and note-synthesis platform developed by Google. NotebookLM was employed to support data organisation, retrieval, pattern identification, and cross-document comparison across the dataset. However, the interpretation and validation of themes remained the responsibility of the researchers, following established principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

The paper-trail analysis was conducted in three interconnected stages. First, the identification stage involved extracting recurring themes, allegations, narratives, and factual claims across Telegram posts, online news reports, and court documents. Second, the comparison stage traced how these elements evolved over time by examining whether claims were reinforced, reframed, challenged, or contradicted across different sources and stages of the case. Finally, the reception stage focused on analysing public engagement with these narratives through Facebook comments, examining how netizens interpreted, contested, endorsed, or amplified the information circulating across platforms. This process enabled the researchers to map the trajectory of narratives from their initial emergence through media dissemination and public reception, providing insights into the construction and circulation of information surrounding the case.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented based on an analysis of content disseminated through alternative media platforms, mainstream news reports, and public responses on social media. The presentation of findings is organised into two main sections. The first section compares the allegations and narratives circulated on Telegram with the findings established through court proceedings. The second section examines the online discourse surrounding the Zayn Rayyan case, focusing on how netizens interpreted, negotiated, and responded to information disseminated across different media platforms. To provide context for the analysis, the following section first outlines the background and chronology of the Zayn Rayyan case:

### *Zayn Rayyan's Murder Case*

5 December 2023 – Six-year-old Zayn Rayyan was reported missing by his family in Damansara Damai, Selangor. Police and volunteers conducted extensive searches in the surrounding residential area and nearby forest trails.

6 December 2023 – Zayn's body was discovered in a stream near his apartment complex. Early police statements indicated injuries consistent with foul play, prompting a murder investigation

December 2023 – March 2024 – Investigations proceeded with widespread media coverage. Netizens speculated about the circumstances of the death, while alternative outlets such as *Edisi Siasat* began releasing alleged insider documents and commentary that questioned investigative integrity

31 May 2024 – Police arrested Zayn's parents after months of investigation. The arrests drew significant public attention and polarised opinion online, as many questioned whether justice was being served or whether institutional shortcomings were being obscured

12 June 2024 – Both parents were formally charged in court under Section 302 of the Penal Code for murder, a charge that carries the death penalty upon conviction. The prosecution emphasised forensic evidence, while the defence challenged the handling of the investigation

June–September 2024 – Court proceedings unfolded with Malaysiakini and other mainstream outlets reporting testimony, evidence, and cross-examinations. Parallel to this, *Edisi Siasat* and social media discourse continued to circulate alternative framings, keeping public suspicion and emotional engagement alive.

(2025) – Ismanira Abdul Manaf, the mother of Zayn Rayyan, was found guilty of neglecting her autistic son and sentenced by the Petaling Jaya Sessions Court to five years' imprisonment. The court ordered the sentence to take effect immediately.

The chronology of major developments in the Zayn Rayyan case was compiled from publicly available news reports and timeline articles published by Bernama, New Straits Times, Malay Mail, and The Rakyat Post (Bernama, 2024; Malay Mail, 2024a, 2024b; New Straits Times, 2024, 2025; The Rakyat Post, 2024). One of the most significant developments in the case was the circulation of an alleged confession reported by *Edisi Siasat*.

#### *Summary of the alleged report on Edisi Siasat*

The alleged interrogation report on the Zayn Rayyan case, circulated via the Edisi Siasat Telegram channel with nearly 800,000 followers, highlights serious concerns regarding the role of the victim's immediate family. The document suggests that investigators identified contradictions in the parents' statements, shifting timelines, and actions that appeared aimed at concealing or altering their whereabouts during critical periods. These inconsistencies reportedly conflicted with forensic evidence and witness accounts, raising suspicions of direct or indirect parental involvement. Furthermore, the report indicates that Zayn Rayyan's

injuries were consistent with deliberate harm rather than accidental causes, strengthening the hypothesis of intentional violence. The wide dissemination of this alleged report through Edisi Siasat has amplified public scrutiny, placing considerable pressure on authorities to ensure transparency in handling the case. While the document does not provide conclusive findings, it underscores the centrality of the family within the investigation and calls for further legal and forensic validation.

The dissemination of this allegation intensified online discussions and contributed to the emergence of a form of "trial by social media," whereby public opinion regarding the case began to form long before formal court proceedings commenced. The allegation became a focal point of online discourse, generating widespread speculation, debate, and scrutiny among netizens.

The intensity of the public reaction was further amplified by the active social media presence of the victim's parents. Their frequent public statements and media appearances, in which they consistently denied any involvement in their son's death, attracted substantial public attention and engagement. These responses generated extensive commentary and emotional reactions online, further fuelling public interest in the case and shaping competing narratives surrounding the investigation. As a result, the case evolved beyond a criminal investigation into a highly mediated public event, where interpretations of guilt, innocence, and responsibility were actively negotiated across digital platforms.

*Dataset 1: Comparison of Alleged Report and Findings in Court Proceedings*

Table 3: Analysis of dataset 1

Category	Alleged Interrogation Report (Edisi Siasat, Telegram ~800k followers)	Findings in Court Proceedings / News Reports
Verified in court	Parents gave inconsistent statements; suggested concealment of details.	Court confirmed inconsistencies in parental testimonies, leading to extended remand (June 2024, <i>NST, Bernama</i> ). Blood traces found in room and bathroom; DNA in the room matched Zayn Rayyan ( <i>Malay Mail</i> , April 2025).
Contested in court	Report implies parents confessed or admitted culpability.	Mother claimed in court she was <i>forced</i> to confess ( <i>The Vibes</i> , July 2025). Defence psychologist testified that hospital records show no proof of neglect/abuse). Father acquitted of neglect charge, mother ordered to enter defence ( <i>The Star</i> , July 2025).
Unverified in court	Report frames parents as directly responsible for deliberate violence and reconstructs a possible motive/timeline.	No official court findings have substantiated intentional violence. Trials focus on neglect charges; no motive or reconstructed timeline confirmed ( <i>The Star</i> , 2025).

The analysis of the alleged interrogation report circulating on Telegram must be interpreted with caution when assessed against verified legal proceedings and credible news reporting. While the report suggests a coherent narrative of parental culpability, court-based evidence presents a more complex and contested reality.

First, elements of the report that align with verified findings indicate that inconsistencies in parental testimonies were identified during legal proceedings. Court reports confirm that such inconsistencies contributed to extended remand decisions, alongside the presence of forensic evidence such as blood traces and DNA linked to the victim (New Straits Times; Bernama, June 2024; Malay Mail, April 2025). These findings suggest legitimate grounds for investigation but do not, in themselves, establish guilt or intent.

Second, several claims within the report remain actively contested in court. Assertions implying confession or direct culpability are contradicted by courtroom testimony, where the mother alleged coercion in obtaining statements, and defence arguments highlighted the absence of medical evidence indicating prior abuse or neglect (The Vibes, July 2025). Furthermore, judicial outcomes, including the father's acquittal on neglect charges and the continuation of proceedings against the mother, demonstrate that legal responsibility remains under deliberation rather than conclusively established (The Star, July 2025).

Finally, the most serious claims in the report, those constructing a definitive narrative of intentional violence, motive, and timeline, remain unverified within formal legal processes. No court findings to date substantiate allegations of deliberate harm, and the case continues to be framed primarily within the scope of neglect rather than intentional violence (The Star, 2025).

From a critical media perspective, this discrepancy highlights the risks of premature narrative closure in digital environments, where speculative or sensationalised interpretations may be presented as factual. Such narratives can shape public perception in ways that exceed or distort the evidentiary boundaries established in court. This aligns with broader concerns in media and communication scholarship regarding the circulation of unverified claims in high-profile cases and the potential for such content to influence public judgment outside formal judicial processes.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between verified evidence, contested claims, and unsubstantiated narratives, particularly in cases where ongoing legal proceedings limit definitive conclusions.

#### *Dataset 2: Netizens' Discourse on the Zayn Rayyan's case*

The analysis examines the various forms of audience engagement, public sentiment, and discursive practices that emerged in response to the narratives circulated across online platforms.

Top three Facebook posts from the local newspaper portal Sinar Harian were selected due to its thorough and investigative reporting on the issue. Facebook was chosen as the sampling platform because Sinar Harian has an active community of readers who frequently engage through comments. Additionally, as Zayn Rayyan's case primarily reached a Malay audience, Sinar Harian, a Malay-language daily newspaper, was deemed appropriate, with a following of 5.9 million followers on Facebook.

The study proceeded by searching the keyword "*Kes Zayn Rayyan Sinar Harian*" and identifying the top three posts with the highest number of comments from 2024 to 2026. Approximately 2,000 comments were collated, through which netizens shaped and expressed their own discourse based on the news postings. The following figure below was extracted through Google Notebook LM on the data collected of comments and it has constructed the netizens discourse and their opinion as per below:

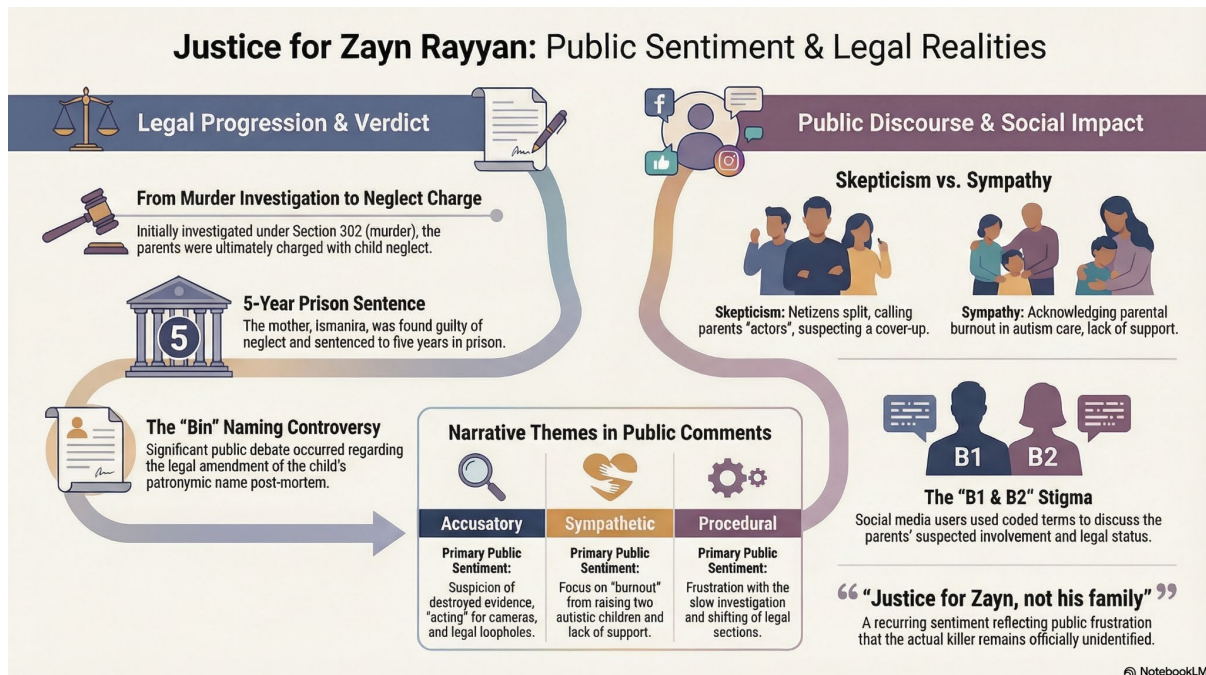


Figure 2: Summarise of dataset 2 using Google Notebook LM

The narrative themes in public comments are being sampled as below:

*Theme 1: Empathy Towards the Parents*

A segment of online users expressed empathy towards Zayn Rayyan's parents, particularly those who had experience caring for autistic children. These users argued that the challenges associated with raising an autistic child were often misunderstood by the public and cautioned against making premature accusations.

You all need to understand. 'His parents killed Zain'...?! It's not as simple as people accuse. Those who say that don't have children, or if they do, they're not autistic. I have an autistic child. I truly understand children with autism.

Such comments reflected a tendency among some users to contextualise the parents' situation through personal experiences, resulting in more sympathetic interpretations of the allegations

*Theme 2: Criticism of the Investigation Process*

Several comments focused on the perceived shortcomings of the investigation, particularly the time taken before arrests were made. Users questioned whether delays may have affected the availability of evidence and the progress of the case.

Six months have passed—how can they still get evidence? Maybe all the evidence is already gone. If the parents had been detained earlier, it wouldn't have turned out like this. The police were too slow to act.

Such remarks demonstrate how public discussion extended beyond the individuals involved in the case and included scrutiny of law enforcement procedures and institutional responses.

### *Theme 3: Reactions Towards Public Displays of Emotion*

Public expressions of grief by the parents also became subjects of online debate. While some users expressed sympathy, others interpreted these displays negatively and questioned their authenticity.

She is good at pretending to cry to gain public sympathy. May this hardship become a reason for something better.

This reflects the polarised nature of online discourse, where emotional expressions are often scrutinised and reinterpreted through competing narratives of innocence and guilt.

The sampled comments illustrate how digital publics actively construct and negotiate competing narratives in high-profile cases, reflecting broader patterns identified in scholarship on participatory media cultures. Rather than functioning as passive audiences, social media users engage in collective meaning-making by drawing upon personal experiences, beliefs, and interpretations to evaluate information and challenge dominant narratives. This reflects the dynamics of participatory culture, where individuals are not merely consumers of media content but active contributors to the production and circulation of knowledge and discourse (Jenkins et al., 2016).

The comments also demonstrate the central role of emotions in shaping public engagement. Expressions of anger, suspicion, empathy, and frustration frequently influenced how users interpreted evidence and assessed the actions of individuals involved in the case. Such patterns are consistent with Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics, which highlights how emotions become integral to the formation, circulation, and amplification of political and social discourse within networked environments. In this context, emotional responses often appeared to shape public judgments as strongly as factual information or legal processes.

Furthermore, the prevalence of speculation, conspiracy claims, and narrative reconstruction reflects the characteristics of networked publics. According to Boyd (2010), digital platforms possess affordances such as persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability, which enable information and user-generated interpretations to circulate widely and remain accessible over time. These affordances facilitate the rapid diffusion of both verified and unverified information, allowing speculative narratives to gain visibility and legitimacy through repeated sharing and discussion.

The findings also point to the emergence of what is commonly described as "trial by social media," where public evaluations of guilt, innocence, and responsibility are formed and circulated before formal judicial processes reach a conclusion. Such dynamics are reinforced by the contemporary information environment, in which rumours, misinformation, and emotionally charged content can spread rapidly across digital networks (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). As Marwick and Lewis (2017) argue, networked communication systems can amplify particular narratives and shape public perceptions in ways that may exceed the evidentiary standards of institutional processes.

Overall, the findings demonstrate how participatory culture, affective publics, and networked communication environments interact to shape public understandings of high-profile criminal cases. The circulation of competing interpretations, emotional responses, and speculative claims illustrates the increasingly complex processes through which truth, credibility, and legitimacy are negotiated within contemporary digital publics.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how narratives surrounding the Zayn Rayyan case were constructed, disseminated, and negotiated across Telegram, mainstream media, and social media platforms. Through qualitative document analysis, the findings demonstrate that digital platforms have significantly altered the circulation of information surrounding high-profile criminal cases. Rather than relying solely on institutional sources, members of the public increasingly participate in the production, interpretation, and dissemination of information, creating alternative pathways through which narratives gain visibility and legitimacy.

The findings reveal that allegations circulated through Telegram, particularly via Edisi Siasat, contributed to the formation of shadow narratives that often preceded and competed with official judicial accounts. While some elements of these narratives aligned with information later reported through court proceedings, other claims remained contested or unverified. Nevertheless, repeated circulation and emotional engagement enabled these narratives to gain traction among online audiences, illustrating how information authority is increasingly negotiated within networked digital environments.

The analysis of netizens' discourse further demonstrates how public interpretations of the case were shaped by affective and participatory dynamics. Expressions of empathy, suspicion, anger, and distrust influenced how information was evaluated and shared, often leading to forms of public judgment that extended beyond the evidentiary standards of the legal system. In this context, the study highlights the emergence of a "trial by social media," where competing claims are debated and legitimised through public engagement rather than formal judicial processes.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on networked gatekeeping, participatory culture, and affective publics by illustrating how these dynamics operate within a Malaysian context. The concepts of the "gray communication field" and "shadow narratives" provide a useful framework for understanding how encrypted and semi-private platforms such as Telegram facilitate the circulation of alternative interpretations that challenge traditional gatekeeping structures and established sources of authority.

The study also carries important practical implications for journalists, policymakers, and legal institutions. As social media increasingly shapes public understanding of ongoing investigations, there is a growing need to balance transparency, public participation, and procedural justice. Strengthening media literacy and promoting responsible information-sharing practices may help mitigate the risks associated with misinformation, premature judgments, and reputational harm.

While the study focuses on a single case and specific digital platforms, it provides valuable insights into the evolving relationship between digital media, public discourse, and criminal justice. Future research may extend this analysis to other high-profile cases, compare different platform ecosystems, or examine how algorithmic amplification influences the formation and spread of alternative narratives. As digital participation continues to transform the communication landscape, understanding the mechanisms through which information is constructed, contested, and legitimised remains essential for both scholars and practitioners.

#### BIODATA

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