

News Coverage of Foreign Sex Workers in Malaysia: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The growing concern over the influx of foreign women in Malaysia as sex workers, has continually gained the attention of the local media particularly the mainstream newspapers. The media, despite playing an instrumental role in bringing about social transformation, has the ability to portray the foreign women in a positive way or to discriminate against them. This study, based on qualitative analysis, represents an attempt to study a social problem particularly in the way that foreign women in sex work have been represented in Malaysia by the mainstream English-language newspapers. The analytical tools of the discourse-historical approach (DHA) are employed in the analysis of the news articles. In particular, the argumentation strategy in the DHA demonstrates that a number of topoi (i.e., the topoi of control, number, threat, and victimisation) have been employed to represent foreign sex workers in the media. Investigation of the newspaper extracts from *New Straits Times* and *The Star* generally revealed that the media have portrayed foreign women in sex work in the offender orientation frame more so than as victims. Furthermore, foreign sex workers are also positioned negatively because of their illegal migrant status, making them doubly discriminated against. Such representations directly impact the women's lives, leading to further discrimination on the basis of their trade and illegal migrant status, denying them a voice and depriving them of their legal rights. The paper concludes by discussing the contributions of the research and emphasises the need for social justice for these marginalised women.

Keywords: discourse-historical approach; sex work; foreign women; argumentation strategy; topoi

INTRODUCTION

Trends in migration flows in the Southeast Asia region have evolved over the years, and one aspect of this migration has been the movement across borders of women in the sex work industry. What in the past was believed to be a dreadful crime that happened 'somewhere' is at the moment greatly affecting many developed countries. "This movement has expanded rapidly over the last two decades and shows no indication of slowing down" (Hugo, 2017, p. 35). Hugo (2017) added that the number of female migrants is more than that of male

migrants and this is particularly ostensible in some situations including short distance migration in Malaysia. The involvement of migrant women in sex work is a significant aspect of non-permanent or temporary migration. It is not easy to access the extent of the sex trade because it operates illegally and is often underground. According to Lim (1998), sex workers do not generally involve in the trade in their home country. Young women are brought to cities with initial promises of better forms of employment but lured into the sex industry (Edgell, Gottfried, & Granter, 2015). According to Ramayal (2013), many women from Indonesia, China, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines have been trafficked and exploited as sexual commodities.

The sex industry in Malaysia has almost seen a change over the years with more foreign sex workers from China, Burma (Myanmar), Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia dominating the city of Kuala Lumpur. It was reported that the sex industry in Malaysia is calculated at \$963.8 million or RM 3.68 billion (“Why Kuala Lumpur Could Become the Sex Capital of Asia?”, 2015). The overflow of women from neighbouring countries has, to some degree, contributed to the poor image and negative impression of the country. The phenomenon poses a threat to Malaysia’s national security and also indirectly affects the socio-economic condition of the country (Rohim & Ahmad, 2017, p. 2). This is mainly due to an increasing demand for sex and the fact that the access to illegal sex is widely available on the streets today regardless of the government’s ongoing efforts to combat prostitution. The U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report (2016) affirmed that young foreign women who are recruited ostensibly to legally work in Malaysian restaurants, hotels and beauty salons are forced into sex work. Thus, not only are they forced into an illegal and demeaning trade, they are also subjected to a drastic change in their legal migrant status. Thus in the eyes of the Malaysian law, (and also in the media), these women are doubly criminalised, firstly because of being involved in sex work, and secondly, because they are seen as illegal migrants. Some of the notorious ‘red-light hotspots’ located in the heart of Kuala Lumpur that offer sex services include Petaling Street, Jalan Alor, Chow Kit, Jalan Sultan Ismail, Jalan Bukit Bintang, Jalan Hicks, Brickfields, and Jalan Imbi (“Prostitution in Malaysia”, 2014).

The scope of the crime in Malaysia is complex and presents a great challenge because of the sophisticated operation of the crime with strong chain of networks (Michael, 2014), its surreptitious nature as well as the high number of cases that go unreported (Rohim & Ahmad, 2017). As a result, accurate national or government records are unavailable to monitor the prevalence of sex work, and also more significantly, to track the numbers of cross-border sex workers. Moreover, gaining access to complete details of the women is not easy because the information is based on secondary sources and due to lack of proper documentation regarding those involved in sex work.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

One of the ultimate challenges studying the sex workers’ population is that the study often intersects with other related areas for example, sex trafficking, HIV and AIDS (Natrah, 2015). Because of the illegality and stigma associated with sex work, any women involved in the business have a dehumanising connotation. Many members of the society “view sex workers as immoral and worthless” (Bell, 2009, p. 2) regardless of whether they voluntarily participate in sex work or have been forced into the trade. Andrijasevic (2010, pp. 14–15) agreed that the distinction between “forced” and “free choice” prostitution does not exist “since it will always and necessarily be degrading and damaging to women”. As a result, the women are not only subjected to marginalisation, but according to Soderlund (2005), present-day stories about women’s involvement in sex work are sensationalised in the media. When

sex workers are associated with notions of immorality in the media, the public may lack empathy for the women. According to Curtis (2012), those that have been sex trafficked have been criminalised as prostitutes in the newspapers, even when they were victims. This assumption of ‘sameness’ could also be found in the Malaysian English language newspapers particularly among foreign sex workers. Considering both groups of women as equivalent, (forced and voluntary sex workers) could have harmful consequences especially to those who entered the trade forcefully as they are viewed as criminals rather than as victims.

In Malaysia, the existing legal provisions and policy on human trafficking is still inadequate (Rohim & Ahmad, 2017). Jenita (2012) argues that the sex workers are deprived of their fundamental rights in the current Malaysian legislation. The migrant sex workers are also subjected to stigmatisation through derogatory terms (Weitzer, 2018) and it still continues, even after the women leave the trade (Sallmann, 2010). Hence, when women in sex work are not recognised as victims of commercial sex, their access to the justice system may be severely restricted (Puidokiene, 2012). Also, the problems faced by these women are totally negated when they are criminalised. These women need support and their human rights should be protected. But, as long as there is no distinction between prostitution and sexual exploitation, the issue of whether to consider the woman as a victim or a criminal will continue to be unclear and unresolved. Hence, this study was conducted to find out how foreign sex workers have been represented in the Malaysian newspapers and if they have been criminalised. The study investigates foreign sex workers in particular because their numbers have surpassed local sex workers, and the study aims to understand how their “foreign” status shapes mainstream narratives in the media reports. In the past, local prostitutes dominated the Malaysian sex industry, but this has significantly changed over the last ten years. It was reported that in 2014, over 6,000 prostitutes from China, Thailand, and Vietnam were arrested within three months. (“Why Kuala Lumpur Could Become the Sex Capital of Asia”, 2015). By investigating the sex workers’ representation in the media, the study not only reveals the media’s treatment of the sex workers via the arguments embedded in texts but also reveals how the negative societal perceptions of these women are often recirculated and further reinforced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The print media, particularly newspapers, play a central role in providing details about illegal sex from which readers can receive the most up-to-date news and interpret information based on what they read. Newspaper readers have very restricted access to information, therefore, they are more likely to trust what they see in the papers when the news sounds plausible. When the media presents news with a certain point of view, it is possible for readers to form a biased perspective. Thus, readers’ access to accurate and unbiased information is unlikely and, even if the information is obtained, the news is often distorted by the people who have strong influence in society. Fairclough (2001, p. 50) indicated that “they (news reporting teams) have sole producing rights and can therefore determine what is included or excluded”.

Traditionally, the mainstream media in Malaysia have been pro-government. Wok and Mohamed (2017, p. 46) stated that all information circulated by the media through its media laws and concentrated media ownership are regulated and controlled by the Malaysian government. In other words, the newspapers in the country are strongly inclined to serve their owners’ politically vested interests. Indeed, “the policy to control the media in Malaysia is a way to deter dissent and criticism of the government, and thus can be considered as undemocratic” (Kasim & Sani, 2016, p. 130). In countries such as Poland and Hungary, the news coverage is also manipulated by politicians who exercise their power over mainstream journalism. Meanwhile, authorities in some sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Asian

countries control their media by putting restrictions or ending their telecommunications services during critical events, for example before elections or during protests (Freedom House, 2017).

Although the media reports on sex work in Malaysia are relatively small, Koskinen, Salminen, and Leino-Kilpi (2014) argued that the media has been shown to influence the attitudes of people. It is possible for readers to form a biased perspective when the media presents news related to sex work with a certain point of view. According to van Dijk (2002), the newspapers serve as an authentic source of information because most people perceive the media as reliable and trustworthy therefore, it is important to find out how the foreign women in sex work are represented. Where newspaper reports might affect the representation of certain people, the language of the media should be explored to disclose the ideologies embedded in texts because those meanings “contribute to the ways we understand the roles of those groups in society” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2002, p. 159). Given that the media serves a gatekeeping role in the construction of public beliefs and, perhaps, in social change (Happer & Philo, 2013), it is crucial that members of society be exposed to the facts about the foreign women, many of whom have fallen victim to the illegal trade. Also, investigating the news reports about the marginalised population would contribute significantly in acquiring a better understanding of how they have been represented in the newspapers.

Although there is a great deal of published research on sex work globally (Balfour & Allen, 2014; Comte, 2014; Davis, 2004; Hynes, 2015; Jeal & Salisbury, 2013; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017; Monto, 2014), such studies are scarce in Malaysia. Natrah (2015, p. 31) for example observes “a paucity of CDA based research on sex workers especially in Malaysia”. Most of the research in the country has been focused on the sociological aspects of sex work. For example, Jacob (2008) examined the characteristics and coping pattern of young adults as sex workers. Other studies have focused on sexually transmitted diseases among Malaysian sex workers (Ramachandran & Ngeow, 1990), survivors of child sexual abuse (Wahab, Tan, Marimuthu, Razali, & Muhamad, 2013), differences in self-esteem between Muslim and non-Muslim women in prostitution (Nasir, Zamani, Ismail, Yusooff, & Khairuddin, 2010), and children’s involvement in prostitution (Lukman, 2009). In recent research, Adib, Hussin, and Ahmad (2018) studied the social pattern of homeless sex workers in Kuala Lumpur. Since literature on sex work in the field of linguistics is largely absent, it is important that this study is carried out as an attempt to contribute to the development of critical discourse studies within the Malaysian context. Moreover, a critical analysis of the newspaper coverage of foreign sex workers is significant because media reportage that presents the women in a negative manner or as an out-group, may result in the increased victimisation of the women. Furthermore, most of the literature on sex work in Malaysia focuses on Malaysian sex workers, or sex workers as a homogenous group. It is crucial to acknowledge the intersections between sex work and migration, especially irregular or illegal migration, which positions women in greater discriminatory ways. It is our stand that a critical discourse analysis of the representation of foreign sex workers in Malaysia offers a compelling view into how sex work and migration are interlinked to position women in complex yet negative ways, which may be different from the representations of sex workers in general.

THE DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

This study uses Wodak’s discourse-historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) to explore the argumentation strategies employed in Malaysian newspapers to justify and legitimise the negative and positive representation of foreign sex workers in Malaysia. Falling under the broad umbrella of critical discourse analysis (CDA), the discourse-historical approach (DHA) places emphasis on discursive and linguistic elements, social practices, and in-depth analysis

(Krzyżanowski, 2010). Wodak and Reisigl first developed the DHA to examine Kurt Waldheim’s 1986 Austrian presidential campaign by analysing the structure of anti-Semitic stereotyped images that appeared in public discourses (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

One important aspect in DHA is the emphasis on historical context which “supports the integration of available knowledge about the historical sources and backgrounds of the social and political fields in which discursive events are embedded” (Wodak, 2001, p. 65). In other words, DHA’s historical context is analysed and incorporated in the interpretation of all layers of a text and discourses (Krzyżanowski, 2010). DHA also emphasises that power is acquired and maintained through the language employed by people in influential positions, and, because of that, this approach is used in this study to permit a critical examination of the language of the news media. More specifically, the DHA is problem oriented hence, does not focus on specific linguistic items. It integrates different theories and methodologies to help understand and explain the ideologies hidden in discriminatory discourses. It is the most powerful approach to discourse analytical research about positive-Self and negative-Other presentations. In this study we do not claim to provide a thorough representation of the foreign women in Malaysian newspapers. Instead, we intend to offer insights about the way newspapers represent and construct particular meaning about the women.

DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES

Unlike other CDA approaches, the DHA deals primarily with the deconstruction of texts in a way that reveals what is not said in texts via the different types of discursive strategies, i.e., referential strategies, predicational strategies, argumentation strategies, perspectivation strategies, and mitigation and intensification strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). The discursive strategies proposed by Reisigl and Wodak (2009, p. 95) are detailed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Discursive Strategies

Strategy	Objectives	Devices
Referential/ Nomination	Construction of in-groups and out-groups	Membership categorization, deictics, anthroponyms, biological naturalizing, and depersonalizing metaphors and metonymies E.g. verbs and nouns to denote actions, metaphors, anthroponyms, deictics
Predication	Labelling social actors more or less positively or negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively	Stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits, and implicit and explicit predicates E.g. adjectives, prepositional phrases, similes, conjunctive clauses etc.
Argumentation	Justification of positive or negative attributions	Topoi used to justify political inclusion or exclusion, discrimination, or preferential treatment E.g. Topos of burden (‘they are a burden on our society’), topos of culture (‘their culture is too different’).
Perspectivation	Expressing involvement, positioning speaker’s point of view	Reporting, description, narration, or quotation of (discriminatory) events and utterances E.g. direct and indirect speech, quotation marks, discourse markers/particles
Mitigation/ intensification	Modifying the epistemic status of a proposition	Intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force of (discriminatory) utterances E.g. tag questions, hesitations, vague expressions, verbs of saying, feeling, thinking

Wodak (2001, p. 73) defined strategy as “a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve particular social, political, psychological or linguistic aims”. The discourse-historical approach is suitable for investigating media discourses and power relations due to its critical stance in

approaching a particular research topic. However, for the purpose of this study, only topoi (the plural for topos), an aspect of the argumentation strategy, are investigated as they appeared most frequently in our analysis. Topoi have been examined in a number of studies that construct migrants in a negative way for example, in parliamentary debates (Wodak & van Dijk, 2000), election campaigns (Pelinka & Wodak, 2002), and on policy papers (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Topos is a common argumentation strategy used in texts and talk through which positive and negative attributions of social groups are justified and legitimised. Topoi analysis is mainly performed to uncover the different types of arguments hidden in a specific cohort of text (Fairclough, 1995). In the DHA, topoi are the “content-related warrants or ‘conclusion rules’ that connect the argument or arguments with the claim or conclusion” (Wodak, 2001, p. 74).

METHODOLOGY

Following a qualitative research paradigm, we attempted to investigate the ways through which foreign women involved in sex work in Malaysia, are represented in the English-language newspapers in Malaysia. The present study is part of a larger project aimed at examining the representation of sex workers in Malaysia. It consists of news reports that cover issues relating to foreign women’s involvement in sex work retrieved from the official websites of mainstream newspapers *The Star* and *New Straits Times* from mid-2010 to mid-2016. The year 2010 is significant as it is in this year that the Malaysian Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act (referred to as ATIPSOM) was amended due to the country’s poor performance in combating human trafficking and smuggling of migrants. Hence, there was a need to observe the effectiveness of the change and to enable us to gather news reports relevant for analysis.

The two national newspapers were selected for exploring media coverage on this issue because they are the country’s leading English-language newspapers and have a large circulation in Malaysia. As of December 2016, *The Star* had an average of 220,972 copies sold daily while *New Straits Times* had a daily circulation of 54,490 copies (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2016). The decision to select online news reports was mainly due to their accessibility. Newspaper excerpts selected for analysis contained seven articles from *New Straits Times* and five from *The Star*. The small sample size although may not be sufficient in providing enough evidence for the construction of discourse, we believe the findings of the analysis can yield important data (van Leeuwen, 2009). Table 2 provides the list of articles from the selected newspapers in chronological order.

TABLE 2. Lists of Newspaper Articles from *New Straits Times* and *The Star*

Date	Newspaper Heading	Length of Article
8 May 2010	10 China dolls held in estate	150 words
10 September 2011	Duped into prostitution	435 words
17 March 2012	Not a single case	643 words
31 March 2012	End this Modern Day Slavery	684 words
10 April 2012	Heinous Tales	490 words
18 September, 2012	Labuan police focus on human trafficking, gambling	172 words
9 November, 2012	46,135 foreign prostitutes arrested since 2008	179 words
10 December 2012	Hookers earn quick bucks	221 words
22 July 2013	Human trafficking syndicate busted	217 words
6 September 2013	70 foreign women detained in raid	217 words
4 January 2015	Police save 184 foreign women	216 words
26 May 2016	Two women saved from sexual slavery in Klang	283 words
Total number of words		3,907 words

Search results were examined manually, and only articles that were directly linked to the study were included and analysed. In order to avoid redundancy, duplicate news reports (i.e., reports that appeared in the online archives of both newspapers) were removed before the detailed analysis was performed. The news reports were chosen if they dealt with the arrests of foreign sex workers, the rescue of foreign sex workers, the sufferings endured by foreign sex workers and stories narrated by foreign sex workers themselves. Articles extracted from the respective newspapers were saved in separate folders and organised systematically according to the source of the article and date of publication. Next, articles from the two newspapers were carefully reviewed and read “line by line and word by word to determine the concepts and categories that fit the data” (Berg, 2004, p. 281). News articles that fit the study criteria were selected and coded manually according to the different types of topoi. At this stage, the selected articles were examined one by one to identify any emerging patterns of meaning (words, phrases or sentences) that shows the way the women have been represented in the newspapers. The four types of topoi (control, threat, number, and victimisation) were used for examining the arguments about foreign sex workers in newspaper excerpts as these topoi appeared more frequently in the data. The final stage of the coding process involved the interpretation of news excerpts. The following are some examples identified in *New Straits Times* and *The Star*.

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| Topos of control | – E.g. deny future entry, arrested, directive had been issued |
| Topos of number | – E.g. 46,135 foreigners, 5,956 foreigners, 8,078 foreigners |
| Topos of threat | – E.g. men who had taken these foreign guest relations officers as their mistresses, husbands spending a lot of time – and money |
| Topos of victimisation | – E.g. threaten and force them into prostitution, tortured |

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that foreign sex workers were represented in *The Star* and *New Straits Times* through several types of topoi. We will deal with each of the topoi in turn in the next four subsections. Excerpts from both newspapers were included and the sections where it demonstrates the topoi have been marked by bolding the text.

TOPOS OF CONTROL

The Malaysian media has exhibited the negative topos of control toward foreign women involved in sex work regardless of their ‘suspected’ status as shown in Excerpt A. The topos of control is used here to demonstrate the higher authorities as having power to prevent entry of sex workers into the country. The broad discourse of controlling and limiting the illegal activities is marked in excerpts from both newspapers. The newspapers’ intended message is clear, that is, the readers are informed of the concerted actions taken by the government against women involved in clandestine sex work because prostitution is deemed illegal (Nasir et al., 2010).

Excerpt A

Last month, police had approached the Immigration Department to fingerprint these women in hopes it would use its discretionary powers to **deny future entry** to these foreigners suspected of being involved in vice. In the last three years, 35,683 foreign women were **arrested** for alleged prostitution under “Ops Noda”. In an immediate reaction, Attorney-General’s Chambers Prosecution Division

chief Tun Abd Majid Tun Hamzah said a **directive had been issued** that since the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (ATIP) had come into effect, investigation papers on foreign women caught during vice raids must be opened under ATIP.

Source: Not a single case, NST, 17 March 2012

Excerpt A contains arguments for pressing action to oppose prostitution-related activities performed by foreigners. The control imposed by the Immigration Department on foreign women in sex work as in ‘deny future entry, arrested, directive had been issued’ in one way or another establishes the idea of a scuffle between the Malaysian government (Us) and foreigners involved in the illegal sex work (Other). The execution of the directive in the article is justified because soliciting for sex is prohibited in Malaysia (Laws of Malaysia, Act 574 Penal Code, Section 372B) and that the demand for sex has resulted in the increasing number of sex-related cases. This strategy is expected to have serious consequences because the jurisdiction of the Royal Malaysian Police Force (RMP) is highly esteemed, thus the police force holds power in the country’s main law enforcement bureau to prevent and control all crimes related to sex work.

Evidence of the topos of control can also be observed in Excerpt B (see below). In this article, the Labuan police chief, Supt Adzhar Othman is given space to speak in an authoritative voice: “We will not allow”. This statement sends a clear message that any activity involving sex work on the Labuan Island is forbidden and that “strict law enforcement was needed”. This news report argues for increased control against those who operate illegal activities including sex work on the island. By quoting the police chief’s exact words, the newspaper constructs a strong positive-Us for Supt Adzhar. It also justifies the proposed enforcement because the island has gained a good reputation because of its low crime index, and the authorities are serious about maintaining the island’s good name.

Excerpt B

Labuan police chief Supt Adzhar Othman said this was to ensure that such activities did not mushroom here. “The island is known as a clean island with a **low crime index**, and we want to maintain it that way. **We will not allow** the island to become a sex haven, either,” he said today. Alluding to the recent case of five women who were forced into prostitution after being promised restaurant jobs by an agent here, he said this proved **strict law enforcement was needed**.

Source: Labuan police focus on human trafficking, gambling, NST, 18 September, 2012

It is significant that the report focuses upon the representation of Supt Azhar and the island of Labuan in positive ways and also represents human traffickers and sex work as a crime. Trafficked foreign sex workers themselves are mentioned in terms of enforcing the laws strictly, rather than as victims who need rescuing and help. Thus, the entire notion of trafficking and sex work in this excerpt is premised upon the topos of control, where law enforcement is represented as more important than assisting trafficked sex workers.

TOPOS OF NUMBER

The media generally makes reference to foreign women in sex work through statistics and numbers—the topos of number. The media uses this topos successfully to draw readers’ attention to the large number of women involved in the country’s commercial sex work. In Excerpt C, the newspaper draws attention to numbers by referring to ‘46,135 foreigners, 5,956 foreigners, 7,638 and 12,631 the following year and 8,078 foreigners’, not only with the purpose of creating fear among the community about the ever-growing illegal activity but,

on a wider level, it associates Malaysia with notoriety regardless of its unremitting efforts to resist prostitution.

Excerpt C

POLICE have detained a total of **46,135** foreigners believed to be involved in prostitution from 2008 until September this year, the Dewan Rakyat was told. Deputy Home Minister Datuk Wira Abu Seman Yusop said the Government was aware of such activities and would not hesitate to take stern action to curb the problem. “In 2008, we nabbed **5,956** foreigners, **7,638** in 2009, **12,631** the following year and **11,832** last year. As of September, we detained **8,078** foreigners,” he told Mohsin.

Source: 46,135 foreign prostitutes arrested since 2008, The Star, 9 November, 2012

In this excerpt, the topos of number is mostly used to describe the large group of foreign women who are often associated with low morality for their involvement in sex work. Regardless of many Malaysian women being victimised and compelled into sex work, the newspapers seldom reveal any information about the women in terms of numbers in contrast to those from foreign countries. The media subtly resists the presence of foreign women through the topos of number by imparting a pessimistic idea that prostitution as a crime in Malaysia is committed by foreigners. In Excerpt D, the topos of number is exhibited by featuring the foreigners as sex workers in large numbers ‘70 foreign women’.

Excerpt D

JOHOR BARU: The Johor Immigration Department arrested **70 foreign women** at an entertainment outlet in Stulang Laut on Wednesday. State Immigration enforcement unit deputy chief Masri Abdul said the raid followed complaints by members of the public about the presence of foreign women in large numbers.

Source: 70 foreign women detained in raid, NST, 6 September 2013

The effect in both of the above excerpts is to focus upon foreign sex workers as illegal migrants who constitute a threat to Malaysia through their influx into Malaysia. Migrants have often been represented as negative as seen in reports of the influx of migrants from the sub-Saharan and African regions into Europe and Mexico into the U.S (see Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Wodak & Boukala, 2015). This focus on the threat and burden of sex workers as numerous illegal migrants shifts the representation of them as victims of the cross-border sex trade, and negativises them in terms of their illegal migrant status.

In Excerpts E and F, foreign women have been portrayed positively through the topos of number. The positive use of topos of number in both excerpts shows the number of women being rescued from the sex trade as in ‘rescued 184 foreign women believed to be victims’ and ‘rescuing six women from India, four from Pakistan, three from Nepal and two from Bangladesh’. The use of the topos of number in a positive way by the newspapers not only highlights the government’s acts of kindness in saving women from becoming victims but also draws attention to the enforcement officers’ successful rescue mission.

Excerpt E

KUALA LUMPUR: Police **rescued 184 foreign women** believed to be victims of human trafficking during a raid on a nightclub in Jalan P. Ramlee here yesterday.

Source: Police save 184 foreign women, NST, 4 January 2015

Excerpt F

Bukit Aman anti-vice, gambling and secret societies division head Senior Asst Comm Datuk Jalil Hassan said police **rescued six women from India, four from Pakistan, three from Nepal and two from Bangladesh** during a raid on a premises at 12.30am yesterday along Jalan Inai here.

Source: Human trafficking syndicate busted, The Star, 22 July 2013

TOPOS OF THREAT

Foreign women, particularly those from China, are perceived as being dangerous to the public, which gives rise to the topos of threat. Relating to this topos, Wodak (2001, p. 75) stated that if “there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them”. The presence of Chinese nationals in the country as sex workers has raised concerns amid the locals. Married women claim their husbands have neglected their responsibilities toward their family after taking the Chinese women ‘as their mistresses’ (Excerpt G).

Excerpt G

Perak Criminal Investigation Department chief Datuk Mohd Dzuraidi Ibrahim said ten women from China, aged between 32 and 44, who worked as guest relations officers and 16 customers were detained during the operation. Dzuraidi added that before the raid, the police had received many **complaints from wives of men who had taken these foreign guest relations officers as their mistresses and ended up ignoring their responsibilities toward their family.**

Source: 10 China dolls held in estate, NST, 8 May 2010

Another example of the topos of threat is evident in Excerpt H. The newspaper, through its reporting, has spread moral panic among the public especially married women for the damage brought about by the Chinese nationals to the husband and wife relationship. The report demonstrates the threat topos as ‘husbands spending a lot of time – and money’ on Chinese women is a kind of mental torment endured by many wives who dread their husbands being attracted to the women’s charms.

Excerpt H

It’s not only Chinese men who are falling for the charms of the so-called China Dolls, the bane of many wives. There had been numerous complaints about **husbands spending a lot of time – and money – on these women who reportedly also offer sex services.**

Source: 10 China dolls held in estate, NST, 8 May 2010

Overall, the topos of threat in the newspapers represents foreign women in sex work as problematic not only within the family institution but also at the national level. Examples of economic and health threats presented in the reports refer to ‘money being drained out of the country and the possibility of these women being HIV carriers’ (Excerpt I). The Malaysian government is afraid that the huge income generated from the prostitution industry ‘... up to RM30, 000 each in only 20 days’ will destroy the country’s financial stability. Evidence from a media source confirms Malaysia’s being ‘placed 17 out of 26 countries with the highest revenue from the sex industry’ (“Prostitution in Malaysia”, 2014).

Excerpt I

FOREIGN women are earning quick bucks **up to RM30,000 each in only 20 days** by prostituting themselves in Malaysia. Bukit Aman anti-vice, gambling and

secret societies (D7) division chief assistant director Datuk Abdul Jalil Hassan said these activities were worrying as not only was **money being “drained out of the country”**, there was the **possibility of these women being HIV carriers**.

Source: Hookers earn quick bucks, The Star, 10 December 2012

TOPOS OF VICTIMISATION

Both newspapers have drawn on the topos of victimisation to represent foreign women in sex work as vulnerable and powerless individuals. In almost all stories about the women, the news is reported from the perspective of the journalists. Only a handful of articles are accounts of victimisation recounted by the women themselves. According to Natrah (2015), sex workers' voices are often silenced and not given much attention by and in the mainstream media. Excerpts J, K, and L provide evidence of this. The newspapers have employed certain expressions to describe the women's suffering to legitimise the topos of victimisation that calls for readers' sympathy toward the women. This means, the topos of victimisation can be linked with both positive and negative outcomes.

Excerpt J

The high school graduate, along with several other women from China, had been working at the outlet for more than a year but only received their salaries occasionally. They were also **forced to endure slave-like** working conditions. Fortunately for them, the police were alerted and a patrol car arrived just in time to prevent Wang and her friends from doing something drastic to **escape the hell hole** they were in. The rescued women have since revealed that they were **forced to work 364 days** a year from 11am to 1am and only received a maximum of RM18 from each customer they massaged.

Source: End this Modern Day Slavery, NST, 31 March 2012

Excerpt K

He said the two victims were **locked** in a room and **forced to have sex** without payment. “One of them was also **forced to have unnatural sex** to satisfy customers,” he added. Sakib explained that the two women tempted into coming to Malaysia under the pretext of working as waitresses with high salaries. “Their huge debt with the syndicate was used as a reason to **threaten and force them into prostitution**,” he added.

Source: Two women saved from sexual slavery in Klang, NST, 26 May 2016

Excerpt L

Among them was a girl who **could not tolerate** it anymore and tried to run from her pimps. She was unfortunately caught. The pimp then gathered the others around, started **stripping her naked, and hung her upside down** from the fan with her toes touching the centre as it spun. “**The pain** experienced elicited loud screams from the girl, so loud that the rest of her mates could never forget it,” says Wong of the group who asked her for help. “The **tortured** girl was never seen again.”

Source: Heinous Tales, The Star, 10 April 2012

Although the newspapers allow the women's voices to be heard in the reports that narrate their plights, this could only be seen in some of the news articles. In Excerpt M, the women describe their suicide attempts and being in a condition of enslavement (‘I was locked in my room and was not allowed to go out. I was so depressed that I felt suicidal’, ‘We were

also forced to work when we were sick'). Words such as 'suicide', 'locked', 'depressed', 'forced' and 'scarred' can evoke readers' emotions, especially when presented from a first-person point of view.

Excerpt M

When Delima (not her real name) was told that she had secured a job as a domestic helper in Singapore, the Indonesian was elated. She was horrified when her employer turned out to be a pimp and her place of work and new home was a brothel in Bukit Bintang. For weeks, she cried and even contemplated **suicide**. "**I was locked in my room and was not allowed to go out. I was so depressed that I felt suicidal**. The pimp **warned** me that the authorities would put me in jail," said Delima.

Another victim, Kasturi (not her real name) was also duped by "Ibu Illy", who told the 23-year-old she could work as a maid in Japan. "We were paid based on how many customers we had in a day. **We were forced** to entertain at least six to seven men daily. We were also **forced to work when we were sick**," Kasturi added. "**Our lives have been scarred** and things will never be the same again," said Delima, who vowed to look for "Ibu Illy" and hand her over to the authorities.

Source: Duped into prostitution, The Star, 10 September 2011

The excerpts demonstrate the media's depiction of women as individuals suffering from enslavement and torture. Portraying them as victims of the sex trade not only calls for the authorities' action to rescue other women in the same situation, but the topos of victimisation intensifies the women's vulnerability which can bring negative impact to them.

Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) argumentation strategy has offered insights about how different types of topos have been employed in the discourses surrounding foreign women in sex work in Malaysian English-language newspapers over a 6-year period. Analysis of reports in *New Straits Times* and *The Star* revealed a particular type of news coverage that is prone to influence people's beliefs about the foreign sex workers. There is clear evidence of the 'othering' of foreign women in the newspapers. Griffiths and Nesdale (2006, p. 736) believe that, through this 'othering', stereotypes and prejudice toward out groups are developed in society. It was found that the selected newspaper articles in the present study were on the whole disseminating negative views about the foreign women's involvement in sex work as they are assumed to bring problems to the country at both national and community levels. The topos of control, threat, and number are salient in both newspapers for it is through these topos that the public form their negative judgment about the women in terms of their illegal trade and migrant status.

The topos of control is used in the newspapers to delegitimise and derogate the foreign women. This is supported by examples provided in the news excerpts that describe the women being responsible in bringing down the reputation of the country. Therefore, the topos of control suggests the necessity to restrain their entry and the illegal activities as a way to maintain a safe and peaceful nation. Within the topos of threat, women from China are seen as a threat to national economy by exhausting the country's revenue, but also causing strain in people's lives and carrying transmissible diseases. This kind of media reporting implies that the newspapers support the government's actions and are unsympathetic concerning foreigners. The 'othering' of the foreign women can drive them into marginalisation and vulnerable positions. The topos of number was enforced in the newspapers to emphasise the large number of foreign women serving as sex workers. The use

of topos of number can be found in previous research by Natrah (2015) who examined the strategies employed in the newspapers to represent the sex workers. In her study, the sex workers were greatly emphasised through the topos of number to illustrate the increasing number of sex workers in the Malaysian community. In some news articles, the topos of number was used in a positive manner by supporting the government's initiatives in relation to the number of women rescued from sex trafficking. The foreign women's victimisation is legitimised in the mainstream newspapers via the topos of victimisation. This is an important finding because elements of victimisation can rarely be found in both the Malaysian national newspapers. The representation of women as victims of the sex crime has been limitedly discussed in the newspapers. DiBennardo (2018) in her study on how sexual predators are represented in the news media found that news reports present adult victims of sex crime mainly women, as accountable for their victimisation. Readers are usually exposed to stories written either from the journalists' or influential people's point of view, and not accounts by the women themselves. This aspect is also apparent in a study on media's representation of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants (Bolte & Keong, 2014) which revealed more priority being given to the voices of prominent individuals. Misman, Adnan, Firdaus, and Ahmad (2017), in their study about foreign nationals as offenders and victims, also found an absence of foreigners' voices in the media. According to these researchers, the media gives importance to the dominant voices in order to highlight the authorities' efforts to curb illegal activities. Relating to the topos of victimisation, a small number of articles reported on the women's suffering so that their actual conditions can be better understood. Publicising the women's victimisation is advantageous for them because it is through the newspapers that the women can gain attention from policy makers and government bodies.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the argumentation strategy employed in the DHA can provide a useful framework for analysing the discourse about sex work. The findings derived from the analysis, to some extent provide insights about how foreign women in sex work have been represented in national English-language newspapers in Malaysia through the different types of topoi. A critical analysis of the newspapers is significant because it brings to attention the existing conventions of the sex crime news reporting and perhaps influences society's perceptions of the sex workers. Also, the methodological approach of the DHA that we have used in this study has significant value because it allowed us to examine the representation of foreign sex workers in the media through the lens of migration and the sex trade. Another contribution is that this research, which deals with sensitive topic, adds to the very limited data available on the representation of foreign sex workers in the media particularly within the Malaysian context and in the field of CDA.

Researching vulnerable populations pose challenges to researchers. One main reason is the difficulty in identifying potential victims of the sex trade. The margins between a woman who is forced into sex work and a woman who gives consent to work in prostitution "are subtle, since various forms of precariousness are involved here, creating a web in which women can easily fall into situations of sexual exploitation" (Santos, Gomes & Duarte, 2010, p. 20). Despite the complexity of researching the underground commercial sex industry, there is a need for future research to focus on other groups within this industry, specifically transgenders, male sex workers and even adolescents. Further studies should be trans-disciplinary in nature, linking the discursive construction of identity with a critical examination of the law. Such studies may contribute to a better understanding of the ways victims of the sex trade can be provided access to social justice and human rights.

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