

A Comparative Sentiment Analysis of News Media Discourse on Graduate Communication Skills: Malaysian ESL Versus Native English Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines news media discourse on graduate communication skills through a comparative sentiment analysis of Malaysian ESL and Native English (US/UK/Australia) reporting. Framing Theory guides interpretation by treating evaluative lexical choices as cues that define problems, assign responsibility, and suggest remedies. The study responds to limited comparative evidence that links sentiment totals to the specific word choices and contexts that underpin media framing. A qualitative content research design was used with purposive sampling of 30 news articles (15 Malaysian ESL; 15 Native English) published from 2021 to 2025. Articles were identified via Grok AI keyword-based scraping on X, stored in Google Documents, and analysed using the AFINN lexicon (-5 to +5), POS-based frequency counts, and thematic coding supported by Excel, SPSS, and NVivo. Overall results indicate a moderately positive discourse alongside substantial negative language, reflecting simultaneous promotion of skill value and emphasis on skill gaps. Group comparisons show Native English articles are more optimistic and asset-oriented, whereas Malaysian ESL articles devote more language to deficits and urgency, as confirmed by contextual examples. These patterns suggest that tone differences are systematic framing choices rather than incidental stylistic variation. The findings imply that employability interventions should address both skills development and public deficit narratives, and future research should triangulate sentiment tools, expand outlet coverage, and test longitudinal change across additional soft-skill themes and with larger bilingual corpora to improve generalisability and robustness over time.

Keywords: framing theory; sentiment analysis; graduate employability; communication skills; Malaysian ESL; native English news discourse

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills, especially communication, have become a global premium, and public debates often treat them as the link between education and work. Employers increasingly rank human-centred abilities alongside technical skills, so the topic keeps returning in reporting (World Economic Forum, 2023). At the same time, news media selects angles and keywords that guide what audiences notice and how they judge the issue (López-Rabadán, 2022). Therefore, media tone becomes a filter, which can subtly shift skills talk toward hope or blame. In addition, news language can be analysed as rhetorical language-in-use, where evaluative meanings are realised

through lexical selection and sentence construction that guide readers' logical interpretation of an issue (Mohamad et al., 2022). This rhetorical perspective complements framing interpretations because supporting evidence and complex syntax can make deficits or solutions appear more reasonable, urgent, or persuasive (Mohamad et al., 2022). In Malaysian education contexts, persistent barriers to English learning have also been linked to negative perceptions, low motivation, and perceived irrelevance of English within specific streams, which can constrain learners' effort and proficiency development (Md Zolkapli et al., 2025).

Within Malaysia, graduate communication skills are discussed through the lens of employability, because hiring outcomes and youth unemployment remain sensitive public issues. Large-scale tracer evidence links communication and other soft skills with graduates' employment status, reinforcing a deficit-and-remedy storyline (Basir et al., 2022). In contrast, in Native English settings the discourse more often stresses competitive advantage, workplace influence, and career mobility. These different emphases create expectations that differ across audiences, which helps explain why sentiment patterns separate by writer group. At earlier stages of education, some learner groups report that English feels difficult and distant, and that negative perceptions can reduce effort to improve, suggesting that public deficit narratives may resonate with real motivational constraints in particular sub-populations (Md Zolkapli et al., 2025).

Thus, demand for communication skills and the media's power make sentiment in texts more than style. When Malaysian reporting stresses employability pressures while Native English reporting stresses advantage, the skill can be cast as a shortage or asset; this contrast sets the stage for comparing tones across corpora in context.

Problem Statement

Comparative empirical work on how news media frame graduate communication skills across Malaysian ESL and Native English outlets remains limited. Many studies discuss skills gaps or labour needs, yet they rarely test whether different media communities build distinct evaluative frames in parallel datasets (Roslyng & Dindler, 2022). Without side-by-side evidence, claims about 'deficit' versus 'opportunity' narratives stay impressionistic and hard to challenge. This gap grows when media language is the unit. As a result, policy and curriculum debates may rely on tones rather than measured differences, which weakens cross-context interpretation.

In addition, sentiment scores often hide the lexical choices that create them. When analyses stop at percentages, readers cannot see whether 'negative' comes from nouns that label graduates as weak, verbs that blame institutions, or adverbs that intensify urgency. Lexicon-based approaches are widely used, yet they are frequently questioned for limited validation and for missing contextual meaning in real texts (Öhman, 2021). That detail matters for media framing. If the words driving polarity remain invisible, it becomes difficult to explain why groups differ, which reduces interpretive credibility.

There is also an issue of overreliance on quantitative sentiment totals without enough contextual interpretation. Counts can show that one corpus is 'more negative', but they do not tell how responsibility is assigned, how solutions are proposed, or how readers are invited to evaluate graduates and institutions. Media framing research warns that texts offer interpretive shortcuts that shape public judgement, not just information (López-Rabadán, 2022). When numbers are reported alone, nuance is often lost and the same score can mask very different storylines, which limits practical use of the findings.

Hence, the field faces a linked set of challenges: limited cross-context comparisons, limited visibility of the words that generate polarity, and a tendency to treat sentiment as a final answer rather than a starting point. This matters in employability debates because communication skills are repeatedly tied to graduate outcomes in Malaysian evidence (Basir et al., 2022). To address the gap, the present study compares Malaysian ESL and Native English news corpora and then interprets the scores through part-of-speech examples and close reading. The core contribution is a transparent account of tone, which supports clearer, fairer claims about media discourse. In parallel, evidence from Malaysian pre-university cohorts suggests that when English learning is strongly tied to examinations and performance goals, learners may experience affective strain and burnout-related anxiety (e.g., concern over mistakes), which can shape how problems and remedies are interpreted in skills discourse (Md Zolkapli et al., 2024).

Research Objective and Research Questions

This study aims to compare how news media discourse frames graduate communication skills by examining sentiment polarity expressed through nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs in articles written by Malaysian ESL writers and Native English writers (US, UK, Australia). It quantifies overall and group-based sentiment patterns and then explains these patterns through contextual, sentence- and phrase-level analysis of positive and negative lexical choices.

1. What are the overall total percentages of negative and positive words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs) used in news articles written by both Malaysian ESL writers and Native English writers (US, UK, Aussie)?
2. What are the differences between negative and positive words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs) used in 15 news articles written by Malaysian ESL writers and 15 news articles written by Native English writers (US, UK, Aussie)?
3. What are the contextual examples (sentential and phrasal features) of negative and positive words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs) used in news articles written by both Malaysian ESL writers and Native English writers (US, UK, Aussie)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory

Framing Theory explains how news texts highlight some meanings and mute others. It began with Goffman's (1974) view of frames as schemata of experience, and Entman (1993) later defined framing as selection and salience, which steers interpretation. Key elements include problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and remedy suggestion. In news write-ups, these elements surface via labels and repetition, so the same skills story can sound like a crisis or a pathway. Recent work also clarifies how framing differs from broader discourse approaches and why it matters for media power (Roslyng & Dindler, 2022). Framing is both a theory of meaning and a practical guide for analysing text as it helps link sentiment patterns to the social judgements news invites.

Furthermore, Framing theory is widely used to show how news narratives guide public judgement and attention. For instance, evidence links partisan news exposure with later issue stances, which fits the view: frames can persuade (Earle & Hodson, 2022). Corpus-based journalism studies also combine sentiment and emotion measures to track shifts in evaluative language across periods (Vargas-Sierra & Orts, 2023). In sentiment analysis of news, polarity can serve as a first signal of framing, especially when results are broken down by nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Meanwhile, lexicon-based sentiment tools are debated because usefulness depends on fit with context and purpose (Öhman, 2021). Thus, framing bridges numbers and meaning. This study uses that bridge by pairing sentiment totals with part-of-speech patterns and contextual examples in news writing. Related research on academic persuasion suggests that readers' persuasiveness judgements can be linked to measurable rhetorical cues, including LIWC-based Analytical Thinking and Emotional Tone domains as proxies for logical and emotional appeals (Mohamad et al., 2024).

Overall, the literature positions Framing Theory as a bridge between media language and judgement, from Goffman's interpretive frames to Entman's focus on selection and salience. Its elements, which include problem definition, causes, evaluation, and remedies, help explain why the same issue can be narrated as deficit or pathway, even before tone is counted. At the same time, recent work cautions that framing and discourse approaches overlap yet point analysts to forms of media power, so theory choice shapes results. Methodologically, sentiment scores provide a map, but they can hide lexical triggers that build frames and may misread context when word lists are reused. Hence, a gap remains for studies that pair counts with contextual, part-of-speech evidence in comparable news corpora across contrasting writer communities.

Issues of Communication and Soft Skills among University Graduates

Recent Malaysian evidence links communication and soft skills to graduate employability, yet gaps persist. Using MOHE tracer data, Basir et al. (2022) modelled employability for 100,413 first-degree graduates with logistic regression and reported that communication skills were among the significant predictors of employment status. Tee et al. (2024) used a cross-sectional online survey of Malaysian employers ($n = 376$) and found the largest skills gap in “communication and collaboration” when comparing demand against graduates’ competencies. Still, both studies depend on ratings or administrative indicators, so what “effective communication” looks like in practice is not fully unpacked, which can soften the impact of targeted interventions.

Employer studies also show that communication is seen as essential but still under-delivered by graduates. Teoh et al. (2023) surveyed 63 manufacturing employers and found the largest expectation–satisfaction gaps in English communication and thinking skills, even though all eight employability skills were rated important. Azhari and Satimin (2024) surveyed 112 employers across sectors and argued that English proficiency alone is insufficient without readiness for intercultural communication at work. Even so, sector-specific sampling and self-report limit transferability, so the same “skills gap” can be interpreted differently across industries and then amplified in public discourse.

Usage of Negative and Positive Words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs) in News Reporting

Studies of crisis reporting show that polarity in news language often changes with events, not just with editorial style. Yu and Yang (2024) analysed New York Times unemployment coverage in 2020 using sentiment and emotion analysis (with a timeline and discourse component) and reported that positive sentiment was higher than negative, with “trust” and “anticipation” leading the emotion profile. Vargas-Sierra and Orts (2023) similarly tracked lexically polarised words and emotions in financial journalism across pre-COVID (2018–2019) and COVID (2020–2021) periods. However, validation work warns that lexicon-based scoring can miss contextual meaning when words behave differently in real news sentences (Öhman, 2021), so polarity counts often need careful reading support.

Other work suggests that polarity patterns are shaped by genre conventions and by the sentiment tool used. Vargas-Sierra and Orts (2023) compared The Economist and Expansión across 2018–2019 vs 2020–2021 and used polarised lexical items plus emotion categories to show how crises reshape affective vocabulary in specialised reporting. Cross-method comparison research shows that different sentiment approaches can diverge due to domain effects and embedded word weights (Mahajani et al., 2023), so results may shift when tools change. In unemployment reporting, Yu and Yang (2024) also illustrate how methodological choices influence what is captured as “positive” and “negative,” which makes transparency in tool selection important.

Part-of-speech studies show why news “sentiment” is not only about adjectives but also about verbs and framing nouns. Li et al. (2023) compared two English news corpora on COVID-19 (50 China Daily texts vs 50 New York Times texts) and found differences in reporting-verb categories, with the US corpus using more mental reporting verbs that can signal uncertainty. Bednarek and Taboada (2025) examined quotation and sentiment in a large Canadian English-language news corpus and argued that standard sentiment analysis cannot directly capture Positivity/Negativity as journalistic news values, even when it detects polarity in text. Lexical profiling of online news across countries also shows systematic differences in vocabulary demands by outlet and context (Ha, 2022), reinforcing that word choice patterns are not uniform. Beyond POS polarity, emotional appeal in formal discourse can also be signalled through clusters of emotive phrases and indirectness markers such as passive voice, which have been operationalised in abstract-writing research as pathos-related rhetorical density indicators (Mohamad et al., 2023).

Comparative Sentiment Writing between Malaysian ESL Writers and Native English Writers

Comparative writing research suggests that evaluative language differs between Malaysian ESL writers and native English writers, although evidence is still limited. Sorayyaei Azar et al. (2022) used a mixed-method design to analyse 12 applied linguistics research-article introductions (6 Malaysian vs 6 British/Australian) and

found Malaysian authors concentrated stance features in early moves and showed no self-mentions, while native authors distributed stance features across moves and used self-mentions strategically. In a larger corpus study of academic articles (50 NES vs 50 NNES), Öz (2022) reported significant group differences in the use of boosters, indicating that writer background can affect how strength and evaluation are expressed. A related corpus-assisted comparison also found translated English underused stance features such as hedges and boosters compared to native English, with genre moderating the pattern (Chou et al., 2023), which supports the idea that “tone” is partly shaped by convention and proficiency.

In news contexts, cross-community comparisons show that English-language reporting can differ systematically in lexical choices, even within the same broad language. Li et al. (2023) compared 50 vs 50 English news texts (China Daily vs New York Times) and showed differences in reporting verbs that reflect distinct ways of presenting certainty and attribution. Chuaikun and Wijitsopon (2023) compiled an English-language Thai newspaper corpus (Bangkok Post) and compared collocational patterns against international newspaper corpora, finding both shared and locally distinctive discourse patterns. Broader corpus profiling also shows that online news and magazine language differs by country and outlet in lexical demands (Ha, 2022), which implies that comparisons must control topic and source carefully.

General sentiment-comparison studies further suggest that “native vs non-native” differences may appear as shifts in positivity, stance, and how evaluation is packaged. Exline et al. (2025) applied a transformer-based sentiment model to peer feedback with a random sample of 500 students and reported that non-native English speakers expressed more positive sentiment in what they wrote but received less positive sentiment in return. In academic writing, Liu et al. (2022) compared 112 dissertation abstracts (Chinese vs American doctoral students) and found group differences in stance expressions across rhetorical moves, showing that evaluation is patterned, not random. At the same time, lexicon-based sentiment approaches are known to face validity limits when moved across contexts (Öhman, 2021), so cross-group comparisons benefit from combining quantitative scoring with contextual checks.

It can be concluded that past studies show a recurring pattern: communication skills are treated as central to employability, yet evidence often comes from surveys, tracer datasets, or employer ratings that simplify what ‘good communication’ looks like in practice. In parallel, news- language research indicates that positive and negative wording shifts with events and outlets, and that polarity is carried not only by adjectives but also by nouns that label problems and verbs that allocate responsibility. However, many studies still treat sentiment scores as stand-alone results or rely on tools whose lexicons may not travel well across domains. Therefore, a clear gap remains in comparative, context-sensitive analyses that link quantified patterns to specific lexical choices and their sentence-level functions in news discourse across writer communities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design & Approach

This study uses a qualitative content research design to examine how news discourse frames graduate communication skills through evaluative language. Thirty news articles were analysed, split evenly between Malaysian ESL writers and Native English writers, and the texts were treated as evidence of patterned meaning-making. Qualitative content analysis supports systematic coding while keeping attention on context and trustworthiness (Seddighi et al., 2021; Alejandro & Zhao, 2024). Overall, the design enables close comparison across writer groups, which strengthens claims about framing differences.

This study applies a qualitative lexicon-based approach to identify positive and negative lexical items across nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs in the selected news texts. A sentiment lexicon guides the coding of polarity at word level, and the analysis then checks how those words operate in phrases and sentences to avoid shallow readings. Lexicon-based sentiment work is useful, yet its value depends on matching the method to the research purpose and interpreting results in context (Öhman, 2021). Thus, the approach produces transparent evidence, which supports richer framing interpretation. This combination of automated analysis and contextual checking is consistent with software-assisted rhetorical work that quantifies lexical and sentential strategies as indicators of logical appeal (Mohamad et al., 2022).

Sampling and Instrument

The study uses a small, focused sample of 30 selected news articles: 15 from Malaysian ESL outlets and 15 from ENL outlets (UK, US, Australia). The population is newspaper reporting from widely read outlets in both groups, so the sample supports a fair cross-context comparison. Similar studies show that modest corpora of news texts can still yield reliable patterns, such as 74 mass media articles in a CDA study (Mampaey et al., 2021) and two 50-text news corpora for cross-outlet comparison (Li et al., 2023). Therefore, 30 articles remain manageable for close reading while still enabling meaningful contrasts across groups.

Purposive sampling selected news articles suitable for cross-group comparison. Prior news- discourse studies justify this approach by limiting texts to a clear topic, chosen outlets, and a defined time window, then analysing the corpus in depth (Li et al., 2023; Carreon & Balinas, 2022). Here, 500-800-word articles from the last five years were drawn from leading Malaysian ESL and ENL outlets and had to report on graduate communication or soft skills. This keeps the dataset focused and comparable for the analysis.

The instrument for data collection was Grok AI's scraping tool on the X platform, used through criteria-based keyword searches to retrieve relevant news links and posts efficiently. The tool supports query-driven retrieval (keywords/phrases), time-bounded searching, and rapid capture of public posts and linked sources, which helps build a traceable dataset for text analysis. Prior work has collected large-scale Grok-related interactions and mentions on X to characterise Grok use in real settings (AI Forensics, 2026; Mei et al., 2026). Thus, applying Grok-assisted scraping in this study is justified because it enables targeted, reproducible retrieval under consistent search criteria.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research data was collected using Grok's built-in scraping capability on X (2021–2025) via keyword searches, then candidate items were verified against inclusion criteria and stored in a working document (Google Documents) for tracking and audit. Next, the raw dataset was cleaned by removing duplicates, missing links, and incomplete or off-topic items, after which the final sample was organised by writer group and outlet before analysis. Comparable workflows describe structured extraction from X using keyword-based retrieval and subsequent processing for sentiment/keyword coding (Jess & Bayhan, 2024; AI Forensics, 2026). Overall, the procedure strengthens reliability because collection, screening, and cleaning are documented step-by-step and tied to a fixed timeframe.

The data were analysed through a combined qualitative and frequency-based procedure guided by the AFINN lexicon, which assigns word valence from -5 to $+5$. After preprocessing in Excel, sentiment words were matched to AFINN and aggregated by part of speech; percentages and net sentiment were calculated in SPSS, while NVivo supported thematic coding of framing patterns.

Recent studies have used AFINN to quantify evaluative language in large text collections, including health-report narratives and news articles, because it offers transparent, reproducible scoring (Shiota et al., 2025; Montesinos-Yufa & Musgrove, 2024). Finally, key high-loading words were inspected in context to explain the counts.

Validity and Reliability

In terms of validity, peer debriefing was used as the main validity strategy to strengthen the credibility of interpretations in this qualitative content study. It involves structured discussions with an external colleague who challenges coding decisions, theme labels, and the logic connecting sentiment patterns to framing claims. Recent methodological guidance highlights peer debriefing as a practical way to surface researcher bias and improve confirmability (Ahmed, 2024; Dahal, 2025). In this study, two peers reviewed the coding log, the POS-based word lists, and draft interpretations, and their feedback was recorded to refine the final narrative.

As for the reliability of the study, inter-coders' percentage agreement was used as the reliability check for coding sentiment polarity and framing categories. The measure compares two coders' decisions on the same subset of

texts and reports the share of matching codes as a percentage. Percent agreement remains common because it is transparent and easy to interpret, though it does not adjust for chance agreement (Zhao et al., 2022; Halpin, 2024). In this study, two coders double coded 20% of articles and reconciled disagreements before final coding, which improved dependability.

RESULTS

RQ1: Overall sentiment percentages across both writer groups

Table 1 Overall sentiment distribution across 30 news articles (Malaysian ESL + Native English)

Sentiment	Word count	% of sentiment words
Positive	5,218	60.7%
Negative	3,378	39.3%
Total	8,596	100%

Table 1 summarizes the aggregated sentiment word counts (nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs) drawn from the 30 news articles. The table shows that 8,596 sentiment-bearing words were identified across the corpus, allowing overall polarity to be described at corpus level. Counts were produced by filtering the texts to the targeted parts of speech and tallying positive versus negative items across all articles. Overall, positive words accounted for 5,218 (60.7%) while negative words accounted for 3,378 (39.3%). This produces a positive-to-negative ratio of roughly 3:2, indicating that favourable evaluations appear more frequently than unfavourable ones. However, the negative share remains sizable, signalling that problem-focused reporting is not marginal but routine within the topic. Taken together, the findings suggest a dual narrative: news discourse promotes communication skills as an employability asset, yet it repeatedly stresses that many graduates are still described as lacking these skills and needing improvement.

RQ2: Differences between Malaysian ESL and Native English writers

Table 2: Sentiment comparison by writer group

Writer group	Positive words	Positive %	Negative words	Negative %	Net sentiment (Pos– Neg)
Malaysian ESL	2,342	54.1%	1,987	45.9%	+355
Native English (US/UK/AU)	2,876	67.4%	1,391	32.6%	+1,485

Table 2 compares sentiment word use between Malaysian ESL and Native English (US/UK/AU) news articles across the same set of parts of speech. The table indicates that the Malaysian ESL subset contains 2,342 positive words (54.1%) and 1,987 negative words (45.9%), whereas the Native English subset contains 2,876 positive words (67.4%) and 1,391 negative words (32.6%). In other words, Native English articles show a higher positive share and a lower negative share than Malaysian ESL articles. Net sentiment (positive minus negative) further separates the groups, with +355 for Malaysian ESL writing compared with +1,485 for Native English writing. This pattern is also reported as consistent across nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, suggesting a stable stylistic difference rather than an isolated lexical quirk. Overall, the findings imply that Malaysian ESL reporting is more deficit-oriented, while Native English reporting is more optimistic and solution-oriented in tone.

RQ3: Contextual examples of lexical choices by part of speech (POS)

Table 3: Contextual examples from Malaysian ESL writers (by POS and polarity)

POS category	Polarity	Verbatim example	Brief contextual meaning
Noun	Negative	“ Weakness in English proficiency and soft skills among local graduates...”	Labels the issue as an inherent deficit

Adjective	Negative	“...poor command of English and inadequate communication skills.”	Evaluates skills as below standard
Verb	Negative	“Many graduates lack the ability to articulate their thoughts...”	States absence/deficiency directly
Adverb	Negative	“Graduates are poorly equipped with essential soft skills...”	Intensifies the negative state of preparation
Noun	Positive	“The importance of soft skills cannot be overstated...”	Frames skills as highly valuable
Adjective	Positive	“Employers are looking for effective communication and critical thinking.”	Defines desirable high-quality standards
Verb	Positive	“These skills enhance a graduate’s employability...”	States positive outcomes/benefits
Adverb	Positive	“Universities must proactively integrate soft skills...”	Positions action as forward-looking solution

Table 4: Contextual examples from Native English writers (by POS and polarity)

POS category	Polarity	Verbatim example	Brief contextual meaning
Noun	Negative	“Employers bemoan a shortage of graduates with soft skills...”	Frames issue as supply/market problem
Adjective	Negative	“...a stubborn shortage of graduates...”	Highlights persistence and frustration
Verb	Negative	“Companies struggle to find candidates...”	Centers employer difficulty
Adverb	Negative	“Skills like communication are severely lacking...”	Intensifies seriousness of the gap
Noun	Positive	“The ability to communicate clearly is the number one skill ...”	Treats skills as tangible, acquirable assets
Adjective	Positive	“Communication is the crucial skill for career success.”	Strongly prioritises the skill
Verb	Positive	“Soft skills empower employees to lead and innovate.”	Links skills to agency and capability
Adverb	Positive	“Graduates who can effectively collaborate...”	Specifies performance quality tied to demand

Tables 3 and 4 present verbatim examples that illustrate how positive and negative sentiment is realised through nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs in each writer group. The tables organise the evidence by part of speech and polarity so that the frequency patterns can be interpreted in context. For Malaysian ESL writers, negative

choices such as “weakness,” “inadequate,” “lack,” and “poorly” tend to label graduates’ skills as deficits, while positive choices such as “importance,” “effective,” “enhance,” and “proactively” foreground value and institutional action. For Native English writers, negative choices such as “shortage,” “stubborn,” “struggle,” and “severely” more often frame the issue as a market or system challenge, alongside positive choices such as “ability,” “crucial,” “empower,” and “effectively” that present skills as an asset. Overall, the examples show that the groups differ not only in polarity totals but also in what their negativity and positivity target. Therefore, the qualitative evidence supports a framing contrast between deficit-focused and opportunity-focused reporting.

DISCUSSION

Overall sentiment across both writer groups

The RQ1 finding shows that the combined news corpus is moderately positive, with positive sentiment words (60.7%) outnumbering negative words (39.3%) across nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. This balance suggests that media discourse does not only criticise graduates; it also affirms the value and benefits of communication skills, which fits crisis reporting research where positive language can stay prominent despite difficult realities. At the same time, the sizable negative share indicates that deficit talk is built into employability reporting, echoing financial journalism findings where negative vocabulary persists during disruption. In other words, the topic is framed as both opportunity and concern, not a single storyline. This pattern also supports arguments that sentiment totals are useful but incomplete unless connected to discourse functions, especially when positivity and negativity operate as journalistic values rather than simple emotions. Overall, the takeaway is a ‘value-plus-gap’ narrative for employability debates in both settings, meaning readers are guided to see the skill as essential yet commonly missing.

Differences between Malaysian ESL and Native English writers

RQ2 indicates a clear divergence in tone: Native English articles are more positive (67.4%) and less negative (32.6%) than Malaysian ESL articles (54.1% positive; 45.9% negative), and the net sentiment gap is wide (+1,485 vs +355). This contrast suggests that writer communities may draw on different evaluative norms when discussing employability, shaping how strongly problems or prospects are highlighted. It also aligns with corpus evidence that translated or non-native English can underuse some stance resources, which may reduce the prominence of benefit-focused language and make problem statements sound more direct. Meanwhile, comparative news research shows outlet-level differences in reporting verbs and certainty cues, supporting the plausibility of stable stylistic contrasts across English-language news writing. Put simply, Malaysian ESL reporting appears more deficit-centred, whereas Native English reporting more often positions skills as assets. The conclusion is that the sentiment gap reflects different framing habits, meaning readers encounter the same issue through more problem-focused or more opportunity-focused lenses. This pattern is compatible with evidence from academic-abstract corpora showing that Malaysian non-native English writing can display denser emotional-tone and passive-voice patterns than international native-English comparators, suggesting a broader tendency toward pathos-coloured rhetoric in non-native contexts (Mohamad et al., 2023).

Contextual lexical examples by POS

RQ3 deepens interpretation by showing that the groups differ not only in totals but also in what their negative and positive wording targets in context. Malaysian ESL examples such as weakness, inadequate, and lack tend to define the problem through graduate deficit labels, while positive items like importance and proactively often point to institutional action, producing a “problem + remedy” rhythm. This matches Framing Theory’s idea that texts organise meaning by defining problems, implying causes, and suggesting remedies, so word choice becomes part of the frame rather than decoration. By contrast, Native English examples such as shortage and companies struggle shift negative emphasis toward market constraints and employer experience, which is consistent with cross-outlet findings that reporting choices can signal different positions and degrees of certainty. Importantly, this contextual layer addresses the concern that sentiment tools alone cannot capture journalistic positivity/negativity as news values. The conclusion is that RQ3 explains why the polarity gap appears, meaning the two corpora construct distinct frames, “deficit-centred versus asset-centred”, through patterned lexical choices.

CONCLUSION

This study compares how Malaysian ESL and Native English (US/UK/Australia) news media frame graduates' communication skills using sentiment analysis guided by Framing Theory. Thirty purposively sampled articles (2021–2025) were scraped via Grok on X, stored in Google Docs, and analysed with the AFINN lexicon, POS frequency counts, and thematic coding in Excel, SPSS and NVivo. Overall tone was moderately positive yet deficit-tinged. Native English reporting was more optimistic and asset-oriented; Malaysian ESL reporting stressed gaps and urgency, implying framing differences.

The findings carry two implications. Theoretically, they strengthen a framing account by showing that sentiment polarity is a useful signal of how news selects and emphasises meanings, but it must be interpreted alongside who is positioned as responsible and what solutions are made salient (Roslyng & Dindler, 2022). Practically, stakeholders should respond to both sides of the 'asset-plus-gap' narrative: improve communication training while also reducing deficit-only messaging that can shape expectations in hiring talk and curriculum debates. Because sentiment tools cannot represent journalistic positivity/negativity as news values, decisions should not rely on scores alone and should be checked against contextual examples (Bednarek & Taboada, 2025). Overall, the insight is that skills development and discourse management work best when planned together.

Limitations of the Research

There are three challenges of the present research which include the relatively small sample size of 30 articles, which may not fully represent broader media discourse across countries or time periods. Although the sample size of 30 articles limits generalisability, it remained acceptable for comparative sentiment/framing work because prior studies have also operationalised close, interpretive sentiment/framing analyses using 30 news articles as the primary corpus. (Treep, 2025). In such small-corpus designs, the emphasis is on depth, traceability of coding, and contextual interpretation rather than population representativeness, which aligns with the goals of lexicon-assisted qualitative comparison. In addition, the reliance on AI-assisted scraping via Grok and keyword-based selection may also introduce selection bias. While keyword-based, AI-assisted scraping can introduce selection bias, AI-driven news crawling and semantic extraction systems have been empirically validated and shown to outperform conventional keyword-driven crawlers in extracting relevant newspaper content, supporting the reliability of AI-assisted news retrieval pipelines. (Saravanan & Ashfauk Ahamed, 2025). Research on social media data collection emphasises that automated collection approaches (including scraping and tool-assisted harvesting) are widely used and can be viable for research when the query logic and screening steps are documented to reduce retrieval artefacts. Another limitation is the dependence on the AFINN lexicon, which may oversimplify sentiment by not fully capturing context, sarcasm, or nuanced linguistic framing. Lexicon-based sentiment tools such as AFINN can miss context, sarcasm, and nuanced evaluative framing because they rely on bag-of-words matching rather than pragmatic interpretation. (Öhman, 2021; Bednarek & Taboada, 2025). However, lexicon-based scoring remains adequate for drawing high-level, broad-perspective insights about news sentiment, especially when combined with contextual checking, because it enables transparent, replicable measurement of shifts in media tone across news texts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can strengthen this line of inquiry in five ways. Methodologically, scholars should triangulate AFINN lexicon scoring with alternative lexicons or model-based classifiers, then validate mismatches through close reading, because lexicon methods can miss context-dependent meaning and domain shifts (Öhman, 2021). To deepen explanation, studies can also model how rhetorical "logos" cues (e.g., numerical/nominal supporting evidence and complex sentence structures) co-occur with sentiment polarity to operationalise how news texts build reasonableness, urgency, or blame (Mohamad et al., 2022). Researchers can further test whether adding emotive-phrase and passive-voice features improves explanatory power for deficit- versus-asset frames across genres (Mohamad et al., 2023). Practically, researchers should expand beyond top outlets to include regional and specialised employability media and test audience effects, as topic-outlet differences can shape reporting patterns (Li et al., 2023). Intervention-oriented work may examine whether deficit narratives correspond with graduates' willingness to practice communication in informal digital spaces, including structured social-media activities such as TikTok-based micro-speaking tasks that students perceive as comfortable and beneficial for

language practice (Onn et al., 2024). Finally, future research can link media deficit framing to learner-side mechanisms by comparing cohorts: for example, whether negative perceptions of English as irrelevant or foreign (reported in some Islamic-stream contexts) predict lower engagement with communication-skills development (Md Zolkapli et al., 2025), and whether test-oriented learning motives and maladaptive perfectionism predict burnout-related anxiety that may amplify deficit interpretations in public discourse (Md Zolkapli et al., 2024). Complementary persuasion work can also test whether readers' judgements align more strongly with analytical-thinking cues than emotional-tone cues in different academic and media genres (Mohamad et al., 2024).

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