

Methodological Aspects of Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Pro-Life Actors in the Czech Online Environment

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Abstract: The paper presents the methodological framework of a doctoral research project focused on the strategic construction of the issue of abortion in the communication of Czech pro-life organizations and the Catholic Church on social media. The main aim is to demonstrate the potential of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) for examining the interplay of textual, visual, and symbolic elements in online campaigns and their impact on shaping emotions and audience attitudes. The theoretical foundation lies in T. van Dijk's critical discourse theory, complemented by a systematically developed coding book for the categorization of narratives, ideological frames, and visual strategies. Particular attention is paid to methodological issues of sample selection and representativeness, the operationalization of categories, and approaches to systematically handling a large corpus of qualitative data. The paper also discusses the limitations of applying MDA in visually oriented campaigns and the ethical aspects of working with sensitive topics. It proposes an applicable methodological procedure for the analysis of multimodal political and religious discourse in the digital environment.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, methodology, social media, pro-life, Czech Republic, T. van Dijk

Metodologické aspekty multimodální analýzy diskurzu pro-life aktérů v českém online prostředí

Abstrakt: Příspěvek představuje metodologický rámec disertačního výzkumu zaměřeného na strategickou konstrukci tématu interrupce v komunikaci českých pro-life organizací a katolické církve na sociálních sítích. Hlavním cílem je demonstrovat možnosti využití multimodální analýzy diskurzu (MDA) při zkoumání vzájemného působení textových, vizuálních a symbolických prvků v online kampaních a jejich vlivu na formování emocí a postojů publika. Teoretickým východiskem je kritická diskurzivní teorie T. van Dijka, kterou doplňuje systematicky vytvořená kódovací kniha pro kategorizaci narativů, ideologických rámců a vizuálních strategií. Pozornost je věnována metodologickým otázkám výběru a reprezentativnosti vzorku, operacionalizace kategorií a propojení jednotlivých kvalitativních přístupů. Diskutovány jsou rovněž limity aplikace MDA v prostředí vizuálně orientovaných kampaní a etické aspekty práce s citlivými tématy. Příspěvek nabízí návrh aplikovatelného metodologického postupu pro analýzu multimodálního politického a náboženského diskurzu v digitálním prostředí.

Klíčová slova: multimodální analýza diskurzu, metodologie, sociální síť, pro-life, Česká republika, T. van Dijk

Abortion remains one of the most polarizing and emotionally charged issues in both global and national contexts. In the Czech Republic, Act No. 66/1986 Coll. has regulated abortion for nearly forty years. The stability of this legislation is unusual in Europe, where most states have revised abortion laws in recent decades. In the Czech context, this long-term continuity has shifted the debate away from legislative reform and toward symbolic and value-based struggles. Abortion thus functions less as a strictly legal issue than as a means of negotiating morality, identity, and religion.

Public opinion consistently reflects a predominantly liberal stance. In 2023, the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM) found that 79% of Czech citizens supported a woman's right to decide on abortion (Čadová, 2023). A 2024 Solvo Institute survey confirmed this trend, with 76% of respondents—81% of women and 72% of men—endorsing the woman's exclusive right to choose (Solvo Institute, 2024). Restrictive positions remain marginal, with only 2–4% supporting a near-total ban.

At the same time, international developments highlight the symbolic and political significance of abortion. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* through *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (U.S. Supreme Court, 2022) and the 2020 Polish Constitutional Tribunal ruling (K 1/20), which effectively banned most abortions, illustrate how abortion functions as a symbolic battleground of values, rights, and identities. The Czech debate does not exist in isolation: local pro-life actors adapt global narratives, framing abortion through transnational religious, moral, and cultural discourses.

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Instagram, have become the main arenas for this communication. While traditional Czech media address abortion only sporadically, pro-life organizations and the Catholic Church use social media to circulate emotionally charged narratives and mobilize support. As Beláňová (2020) shows, these groups have shifted from direct political influence toward campaigns and marches framed through secular and scientific language, aiming to resonate in a predominantly secular society (Rees, 2013). The affordances of digital platforms—the combination of text, imagery, and symbols—further enable multimodal communication strategies that blend moral, emotional, and ideological appeals.

Despite their growing prominence, methodological approaches systematically addressing multimodal communication in Czech abortion discourse remain scarce. Existing research often focuses on legal or ethical dimensions, while the strategic interplay of text and visuals in digital campaigns has been understudied.

The aim of this article is therefore not to present empirical findings but to elaborate a methodological framework for analyzing multimodal discourse in the communication of Czech pro-life organizations and the Catholic Church. Drawing on critical discourse theory (van Dijk) and integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Discursive Visual Analysis, and Thematic Content Analysis, the study offers a transferable model for examining how abortion discourse is strategically constructed in digital environments.

1 Theoretical Framework

1.1 Critical Discourse Theory

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the central foundation for this study, examining how language reproduces or contests ideology and power (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). It assumes that discourse is never neutral but embedded in structures of dominance and identity.

Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive model is particularly relevant: ideologies are socially shared beliefs enacted discursively and cognitively (van Dijk, 1998, 2006, 2011). His "ideological square" explains polarization by emphasizing positive traits of the in-group and negative traits of the out-group, while downplaying the reverse. Applied to abortion discourse, this helps show how pro-life actors present themselves as protectors of life while depicting pro-choice actors as irresponsible or immoral.

CDA also stresses context and intertextuality: Czech abortion discourse draws on global narratives, religious doctrines, and political debates. Within this study, CDA serves as the primary lens for analyzing textual communication, providing conceptual tools to identify discursive patterns, ideological framing, and strategies of polarization.

1.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) extends discourse analysis beyond the textual dimension, emphasizing that meaning is co-constructed through language, visuals, symbols, and layout (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Machin, 2013). On platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, multimodality is constitutive—users routinely combine text, image, and design elements to reinforce arguments and evoke emotions.

A key contribution of MDA lies in uncovering how denotation and connotation interact: images may appear neutral but acquire ideological meaning when paired with textual framing (Barthes, 1977; Jewitt, 2014). In abortion discourse, visuals such as ultrasound scans, fetal representations, or crosses interact with text to frame abortion as moral transgression, medical risk, or social issue.

MDA also highlights the affective dimension: visuals and symbols often bypass rational argumentation and appeal directly to empathy, fear, or guilt (Forceville, 2008; Bateman et al., 2017). Finally, meanings are shaped by cultural and ideological contexts; globally circulating pro-life narratives are localized within the Czech environment (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

In this study, MDA complements CDA by extending the focus from textual to multimodal dimensions, enabling systematic analysis of how pro-life actors strategically combine language, imagery, and symbolism in digital communication.

1.3 Thematic Content Analysis (TCA)

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) offers a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying recurring discursive patterns and rhetorical strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Unlike frequency-based content analysis, TCA emphasizes meaning-making: themes are

treated as ideologically loaded constructs that reproduce or challenge power relations (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012).

In abortion discourse, TCA helps trace recurrent framings such as “protection of innocent life,” “women’s rights and bodily autonomy,” or “moral decline and national identity.” Each theme reflects ideological positioning—for example, emphasizing the fetus as a victim foregrounds collective morality while sidelining women’s autonomy.

A key strength of TCA is its ability to capture both repetition and variation across a corpus. Systematic coding shows how pro-life actors highlight some issues (e.g., fetal victimhood) while omitting others (e.g., women’s health). Within this study, TCA complements CDA and MDA by ensuring consistent mapping of thematic frames across actors and platforms.

1.4 Discursive Visual Analysis

Discursive Visual Analysis (DVA) extends Critical Discourse Analysis into the visual domain, treating images as socially situated practices that carry ideological meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2023; Rose, 2016). Visual discourse reproduces or contests power relations, identities, and values, making it essential in studies of political and religious communication.

Central to DVA is the analysis of representational choices—who or what is depicted, how it is framed, and which resources (e.g., color, perspective, symbolism) are mobilized (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In abortion discourse, pro-life campaigns often depict fetuses as autonomous beings, employ ultrasound scans, and frame women in maternal roles. Religious symbols (crosses, churches) and national motifs (flags, family iconography) further moralize the debate and anchor it in culturally resonant frameworks (Beláňová, 2020; Dudová, 2012).

DVA reveals the rhetorical power of images, which evoke empathy, fear, or guilt and often polarize groups in line with van Dijk’s (1998) “ideological square.” The same fetal image may function as scientific evidence, religious symbolism, or political claim depending on framing.

In this study, DVA is used to examine the visual layer of pro-life communication on Facebook and Instagram, identifying representational strategies, symbolic motifs, and rhetorical uses of imagery. Combined with CDA and MDA, it highlights how visuals shape the ideological construction of abortion as a contested moral, political, and cultural issue.

1.5 Synthesis

This study adopts an integrated methodological framework that brings together discourse-oriented and multimodal approaches. Critical discourse analysis highlights how abortion is framed through ideology and power, while multimodal and visual perspectives uncover the interaction of language, imagery, and symbols in producing persuasive and affective meanings. Thematic content analysis adds a systematic lens for tracing recurring framings and patterns across the dataset.

Taken together, these approaches enable a comprehensive analysis of pro-life communication in the Czech Republic as a multimodal and ideologically charged practice. The framework captures both the micro-level strategies of text and image and the broader cultural and political dynamics in which they circulate.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study is structured around a set of interrelated research questions and working hypotheses. It first asks how selected Czech pro-life actors discursively construct abortion and related issues of family policy on Facebook and Instagram (RQ1). Particular attention is paid to the multimodal dimension, examining which textual, visual, and symbolic resources are mobilized and how they interact to produce affect and ideological positioning (RQ2). Beyond individual cases, the study seeks to identify recurring thematic frames and narrative patterns that structure these communications across actors during the period from 27 June 2023 to 27 June 2024 (RQ3). A further question concerns whether there is evidence of strategic coordination or division of thematic focus among the Movement for Life, Stop Genocide, and the Catholic Church (RQ4). Finally, the research investigates how key stakeholders engaged in the Czech abortion debate perceive the role and effects of such social-media communication on public opinion and policymaking (RQ5).

Although the study is primarily qualitative, it is guided by several hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework. H1: It is hypothesized that Czech pro-life discourse tends to frame abortion as a moral transgression while positioning women predominantly in maternal roles, thereby marginalizing themes of women's autonomy and health. H2: It is expected that multimodal resources—particularly fetal imagery, religious symbols, and visual dramatizations of victimhood—play a central role in persuasive communication, amplifying affective resonance beyond textual argumentation. H3: It is hypothesized that, despite their shared ideological stance, the Movement for Life, Stop Genocide, and the Catholic Church employ partially differentiated strategies: the Movement for Life emphasizes family and the “culture of life,” Stop Genocide foregrounds shock tactics and stark moral binaries, and the Catholic Church embeds abortion discourse within religious and cultural frameworks. H4: It is expected that stakeholders perceive pro-life social media communication as disproportionately impactful compared to traditional media, particularly in its ability to mobilize emotions and reframe abortion in terms of morality and national identity.

2.2 Research Design and Data Collection

The dataset comprises 66 social media posts (50 from Facebook and 16 from Instagram) published between 27 June 2023 and 27 June 2024 by three key pro-life actors in the Czech Republic: the Movement for Life (27 Facebook, 14 Instagram), Stop Genocide (19 Facebook; its Instagram account was inactive), and the Catholic Church (4 Facebook, 2 Instagram). These actors were selected for their visibility, ideological prominence, and communicative diversity within the Czech abortion debate. Relevant posts were retrieved using the keywords “potrat” (abortion) and “interrupce” (termination), reflecting linguistic dynamics of the debate—for instance, the Movement for Life consistently employs “potrat” to signal its ideological framing.

The selection was guided by Beláňová's (2020) mapping of Czech pro-life movements, which served as a starting point for systematic searches across Google, Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). To finalize the sample, a comparative overview of follower counts (as of 24

May 2024) was compiled, confirming the dominance of the Movement for Life, Stop Genocide, and the Catholic Church as institutional actors shaping pro-life discourse. All posts were subsequently coded using a structured coding book developed iteratively for this study, which included categories for thematic frames (e.g., protection of life, women's rights, moral decline), multimodal features (e.g., imagery, hashtags, symbols), and ideological markers (e.g., references to religion, morality, national identity). This coding process ensured transparency and consistency in the interpretation of discursive strategies.

2.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis combines several complementary approaches. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the primary framework for examining how abortion discourse reproduces or contests ideological structures and power relations. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and Discursive Visual Analysis (DVA) extend this perspective by highlighting how visual and symbolic resources interact with textual framings to shape meaning. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) offers a systematic tool for identifying recurring discursive patterns, allowing for comparison across the dataset.

Together, these approaches enable a layered interpretation: CDA uncovers ideological structures, MDA and DVA reveal the visual and multimodal dimensions of communication, and TCA ensures systematic identification of thematic patterns.

2.4 Methodological Positioning

This study builds on a growing body of qualitative research that investigates how abortion is discursively framed in different socio-political contexts. Purcell et al. (2014), for example, examined the stigmatization of abortion in UK print media, showing how narratives of shame and morality shaped public understanding. Trzcińska (2021) analyzed abortion debates on Polish Twitter, highlighting how competing ideological actors construct polarized framings and mobilize symbolic language in a highly politicized environment. Both studies demonstrate that abortion is not only a medical or legal issue but also a discursive arena where values, identities, and power relations are negotiated.

While these contributions are invaluable, they largely focus on either mainstream media (Purcell) or user-driven social media debates (Trzcińska). By contrast, the present research concentrates on institutional pro-life actors in the Czech Republic, a post-socialist and highly secularized country where abortion remains legally accessible yet symbolically contested. This methodological shift responds to the relative lack of systematic analyses of strategic communication by institutional actors, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

Moreover, the study advances the field by integrating critical discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, thematic coding, and discursive visual analysis into a unified methodological framework. This combination makes it possible to capture both the textual and visual dimensions of pro-life communication and to situate them within broader ideological and cultural narratives. In this sense, the study not only extends the scope of previous research but also contributes a transferable methodological model for analyzing multimodal political and religious discourse in digital environments.

2.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to the discourse and multimodal analysis of social media posts, this study incorporates an ongoing phase of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the Czech abortion debate. A total of 15–16 interviews are being conducted with a diverse group of actors, including pro-life activists, policymakers, religious representatives, communication experts, and healthcare professionals. Women constitute the majority of respondents, reflecting their central role in reproductive discourse, while men are represented primarily as church officials and policy experts.

The interviews are structured around three thematic areas: (1) personal attitudes toward abortion, (2) perceptions of media and social media influence on public debate, (3) assessments of communication strategies employed by different actors.

The semi-structured format allows flexibility, enabling respondents to elaborate on their individual perspectives while ensuring comparability across interviews. This design also makes it possible to capture implicit frames, tensions, and contradictions between public narratives and personal convictions.

The interview data serve as a triangulating source for the discourse analysis, providing insights into communicative intent, strategic decision-making, and the perceived impact of narratives on public opinion and policy.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

All social media posts analyzed are publicly accessible and anonymized where necessary. The ongoing semi-structured interviews follow established ethical standards, including informed consent, anonymization of interview data, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage of the research. Signed consent forms are securely archived in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Charles University and will be stored for the required retention period. No personal or private communication (such as messaging apps or closed groups) has been included in the dataset.

In addition, the researcher acknowledges her own value-based positioning in relation to the topic and actively reflects on how this may shape interpretation. Reflexivity is therefore treated as an integral part of the research process, ensuring transparency and maintaining analytical rigor while minimizing potential bias.

3 Methodological Reflections and Applications

3.1 Justification for Combining Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Thematic Content Analysis, and Discursive Visual Analysis

The methodological framework of this study integrates four complementary approaches—Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), and Discursive Visual Analysis (DVA)—to provide a comprehensive account of pro-life communication in the Czech digital environment. This combination reflects the complexity of contemporary political and religious discourse, where meaning is not confined to

textual structures but emerges through multimodal interactions, thematic patterns, and visual strategies of persuasion.

CDA has been widely established as a key tool for analyzing how discourse constructs, legitimizes, and challenges ideology and power relations (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). It enables the identification of linguistic strategies such as framing, presupposition, or polarization that structure abortion as a contested moral and political issue. However, CDA alone risks underestimating the multimodal dimension of communication, which is increasingly central in the age of digital platforms (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Machin, 2013).

MDA extends this perspective by focusing on how textual, visual, and symbolic modes interact to construct meaning. In the case of abortion discourse, this allows researchers to trace how imagery—such as ultrasound scans, crosses, or protest photography—reinforces or contests textual framings (Barthes, 1977; Jewitt, 2014). DVA further strengthens this multimodal orientation by systematically interrogating representational choices, rhetorical visual strategies, and their role in constructing collective identities and ideological divisions (Machin & Mayr, 2023; Rose, 2016). Both MDA and DVA address the affective and symbolic dimensions of communication, which often bypass rational argumentation and instead mobilize emotion, empathy, and fear (Forceville, 2008; Bateman et al., 2017).

At the same time, TCA introduces a systematic and transparent way to identify recurrent themes and frames across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). While CDA and MDA provide tools for in-depth analysis of discursive mechanisms, TCA ensures that patterns are consistently mapped and compared across a larger corpus, thus bridging qualitative depth with interpretive breadth (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012).

Combining these four approaches therefore offers significant added value. CDA uncovers the ideological structures embedded in textual discourse, MDA and DVA expose how multimodal and visual strategies amplify these discourses, and TCA provides the systematic framework for tracing recurring patterns across actors and platforms. This methodological integration has been recommended in recent scholarship on political communication and digital religion, where hybrid forms of discourse demand hybrid forms of analysis (Machin, 2013).

In sum, the integration of CDA, MDA, TCA, and DVA provides a robust analytical lens for understanding how Czech pro-life actors construct abortion not only as a legal or medical issue, but as a deeply moralized and symbolically charged cultural conflict. The methodological triangulation ensures both depth and breadth of analysis, while reducing the risk of bias associated with relying on a single analytical lens.

3.2 Linking Methods to Research Questions and Hypotheses

The integration of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), Discursive Visual Analysis (DVA), Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), and semi-structured interviews provides a coherent methodological framework for addressing the study's research questions and hypotheses. Each method contributes a distinct perspective, while their combination ensures systematic coverage of both discursive and contextual dimensions of pro-life communication in the Czech Republic.

CDA and TCA are central to RQ1 and H1, uncovering how abortion is discursively constructed through recurring frames, lexical choices, and argumentative structures. TCA in

particular enables the systematic identification of thematic patterns, testing the assumption that pro-life actors communicate in a repetitive and ideologically consistent manner (H1).

MDA and DVA directly address RQ2 and H2 by examining how textual and visual resources interact to produce affect and ideological positioning. The analysis of fetal imagery, religious symbols, and victimhood portrayals makes it possible to test the hypothesis that multimodal elements amplify persuasion and emotional resonance (H2).

TCA, supported by CDA, informs RQ3, tracing recurring thematic frames across the dataset and clarifying whether discursive patterns are shared across actors. This responds to the expectation of consistent narrative structures in pro-life discourse and links to H1.

The comparative use of CDA, MDA, and TCA corresponds to RQ4 and H3, testing whether the Movement for Life, Stop Genocide, and the Catholic Church employ differentiated strategies despite a common ideological stance. For example, the Movement for Life is expected to emphasize family and the “culture of life,” Stop Genocide to foreground shock tactics and stark moral binaries, and the Catholic Church to embed abortion discourse in religious and cultural traditions (H3).

Finally, semi-structured interviews complement the textual and visual analyses by answering RQ5 and testing H4. They provide triangulating evidence on how key stakeholders perceive the role and effects of pro-life social media communication in shaping public opinion and policymaking, thereby assessing its perceived impact beyond digital platforms (H4).

Taken together, this methodological integration systematically links each research question to an appropriate analytical lens and connects hypotheses to both mediated discourse and stakeholder perspectives. By bridging micro-level discursive practices with macro-level socio-political dynamics, the study offers a comprehensive account of how abortion is framed, contested, and legitimized in Czech digital communication. The alignment between research questions, hypotheses, and methods is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Analytical Framework: Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Methods

RQ	Hypotheses	Methods
RQ1: How do Czech pro-life actors discursively construct abortion and related issues of family policy on social media?	H1: Pro-life discourse frames abortion as moral transgression and positions women predominantly in maternal roles.	CDA + TCA
RQ2: How do textual, visual, and symbolic resources interact to produce affect and ideological positioning?	H2: Multimodal resources (fetal imagery, religious symbols, victimhood portrayals) amplify persuasion and emotional resonance.	MDA + DVA
RQ3: What recurring thematic frames and narrative patterns structure pro-life communication across actors?	Linked to H1 (ideological consistency across communication).	TCA + CDA
RQ4: Is there evidence of strategic coordination or differentiation among the Movement for Life, Stop Genocide, and the Catholic Church?	H3: Despite shared ideology, actors use differentiated strategies (family/culture of life; shock tactics; religious-cultural framing).	CDA + MDA + TCA
RQ5: How do stakeholders perceive the role and effects of pro-life social media communication on public opinion and policymaking?	H4: Stakeholders perceive social media as disproportionately impactful compared to traditional media.	Semi-structured interviews

3.3 Challenges of Multimodal Coding

Multimodal discourse analysis offers unique insights into how textual, visual, and symbolic resources jointly construct meaning. However, its application to sensitive topics such as abortion raises several methodological and ethical challenges that need to be carefully addressed. These challenges relate primarily to the dominance of visual elements, methodological constraints of qualitative research, and the ethical sensitivities of working with reproductive discourse.

Visual Dominance

One of the central difficulties lies in the interpretive dominance of images over text. Visuals such as fetal scans, crosses, or protest photography often carry a stronger affective charge than accompanying textual elements, yet their persuasive power is difficult to measure systematically (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Bateman et al., 2017). Moreover, images are inherently polysemic:

the same ultrasound image can be understood as a medical artifact, a moral appeal, or a political statement, depending on audience positioning (Barthes, 1977; Rose, 2016). This polysemy requires researchers to account for multiple possible readings while avoiding over-interpretation.

Methodological Issues

A further challenge concerns the representativeness and scope of the dataset. Selecting posts from a one-year period ensures relevance but inevitably limits the generalizability of findings. In addition, detailed multimodal analysis is highly resource-intensive, demanding iterative coding and cross-validation between textual and visual elements (Jewitt, 2014; Machin, 2013). Ensuring transparency and consistency thus requires a carefully structured coding book and, ideally, triangulation through peer debriefing or inter-coder discussion to mitigate subjective bias.

Ethical Considerations

Finally, the topic itself introduces heightened ethical complexity. Abortion discourse intersects with questions of gender, religion, and morality, making it particularly sensitive for both participants and researchers. Semi-structured interviews must therefore be conducted under strict ethical safeguards, including informed consent, anonymization, and the right to withdraw at any time. In addition, the researcher must remain reflexive, acknowledging her own value-based positioning and the potential influence this may have on interpretation (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Careful handling of visual materials is also necessary, as some images—such as graphic depictions of fetal remains—carry the risk of retraumatization or sensationalism if not contextualized responsibly.

In sum, while multimodal analysis enables a deeper understanding of the persuasive strategies used by pro-life actors, it also introduces interpretive, methodological, and ethical challenges. Addressing these challenges through systematic coding, triangulation, and reflexive practice strengthens the validity of the research and ensures that findings are both analytically rigorous and ethically sound. To further demonstrate how this methodological framework operates in practice, the next section presents a set of illustrative examples, showing how CDA, MDA, DVA, and TCA can be applied to selected materials from the dataset.

3.4 Illustrative Examples

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

A post from September 15, 2023 (Figure 1), exemplifies how pro-life actors construct a polarized narrative through the ideological square. The text frames a pregnant woman as a vulnerable victim, allegedly “forced into abortion by her partner”, while positioning the movement itself as the compassionate savior offering housing, financial, and legal support. Through hashtags such as #WeDoNotJudgeWeHelp and #PrayersForTheSmallest, the post reinforces the in-group identity as morally superior and empathetic. In contrast, the implied out-group—partners who “force” abortions or women who consider them—are depicted as irresponsible or harmful. This selective framing highlights how CDA reveals ideological strategies of polarization: emphasizing the positive qualities of the in-group while attributing blame and negativity to the out-group.

15.9.2023	<p>Current troubles of some of our clients on #Helpline800108000:</p> <p>🙏 After being pressured—rather than truly deciding—to have an abortion by the father of her second child, and under further stress, the mother is now facing a high-risk pregnancy. Since she has been left without the support of her partner, we are offering assistance in finding suitable housing, as well as material help and, if needed, legal and financial support.</p> <p>🙏 An unexpectedly pregnant woman was given a referral to our counseling center by her gynecologist. For several weeks, she has been considering whether to undergo an abortion or give her child a chance, as her relationship with her partner is currently somewhat unstable.</p> <p>#WeDoNotJudgeWeHelp #PrayersForTheSmallest</p>	
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Figure 1: Post from the profile Movement for Life, published on September 15, 2023. Source: Author’s coding book.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) / Discursive Visual Analysis (DVA)

One illustrative case demonstrates how a seemingly neutral photograph of a blister pack of pills (Figure 2) is re-signified through emotive textual framing (“This is cannibalism!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”). The ordinariness of the medical object is overwritten by strategies of dramatization, moral outrage, and dehumanization. This multimodal interplay shows how visual neutrality and textual extremity co-produce affective resonance, reinforcing pro-life ideological polarization.

8.6.2024	<p>Chemical abortions are primarily induced at home, which means that “blood and placental tissue containing active metabolites of mifepristone are flushed into the wastewater together with the REMAINS OF THE UNBORN CHILD.</p> <p>This is cannibalism!!</p>	<p><i>photo of a blister pack of pills, linked to the embedded URL</i></p> 
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Figure 2: Post from the profile Stop Genocide, published on June 8, 2024. Source: Author’s coding book.

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA)

The theme of “protection of life” recurs across all three actors but in distinct configurations: Movement for Life (October 20 2023) frames it through care and support, e.g., narratives of women pressured into abortion, combined with offers of housing or legal help. Stop Genocide (March 12 2024) uses rhetoric of guilt and redemption, portraying abortion as sin that requires repentance. The Catholic Church (April 9 2024) links protection of life to faith and sacrifice, as in stories of mothers refusing abortion despite illness, framed as trust in God. TCA thus reveals both

convergence (shared emphasis on life) and divergence (care, guilt/redemption, sacrifice/faith), demonstrating its value for comparative analysis of pro-life discourse.

3.5 Added Value for Central and Eastern Europe

The methodological framework applied in this study offers particular added value for the Central and Eastern European (CEE) context, where abortion debates unfold at the intersection of post-socialist legacies, high levels of secularization, and the continuing influence of religious institutions, especially the Catholic Church. Unlike Western European contexts, where abortion debates are often embedded in longer histories of liberalization or polarized party politics, the CEE region presents a hybrid environment in which secular majority cultures coexist with mobilized religious minorities and transnational pro-life movements.

The Czech Republic exemplifies this hybridity: abortion is legally accessible and widely accepted in society, yet institutional pro-life actors remain active and strategically deploy digital platforms to construct abortion as a contested moral issue. This methodological framework—combining CDA, MDA, DVA, and TCA—captures the unique interplay between global discursive imports (e.g., American-inspired visual strategies, slogans, and repertoires of protest) and their local adaptations in a post-socialist, secular setting.

Beyond the Czech case, the framework offers transferability to broader CEE debates on morality, religion, and politics. Similar methodological integration could be fruitfully applied to the study of digital discourse around gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, or nationalist mobilization, where multimodal strategies of persuasion play an equally central role. In this sense, the study contributes not only to abortion research but also to the comparative analysis of ideological conflicts across CEE, offering tools for systematically examining how symbolic, visual, and discursive resources construct contested identities in digital environments.

4 Conclusion

This study has shown how a multimodal framework—combining Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Discursive Visual Analysis, Thematic Content Analysis, and semi-structured interviews—offers a robust lens for examining pro-life discourse in the Czech Republic. By triangulating these approaches, the research captured how textual strategies and visual-symbolic resources frame abortion as a moral, cultural, and political issue.

Drawing on van Dijk's notion of the ideological square, findings reveal how pro-life actors portray themselves as protectors of life while depicting out-groups—women, partners, or healthcare providers—as irresponsible or morally corrupt. This polarization operates through language (“protection of the smallest”), visuals (fetal imagery, religious symbols), and narratives casting abortion as tragedy and collective threat. A key example is the multimodal interplay between an everyday medical object and its textual framing. A seemingly neutral item of daily use, when accompanied by highly expressive commentary, is re-signified as a discursive resource within ideological struggle. This illustrates how discourse operates not only through words but also by recontextualizing ordinary objects, transforming them into carriers of symbolic and moral meaning.

Thematic Content Analysis showed convergence on the idea of “protection of life” but strategic divergence: the Movement for Life stresses care and family values, Stop Genocide foregrounds guilt and redemption, and the Catholic Church situates abortion in religious sacrifice and faith. These distinctions illustrate adaptation to different audiences within a coherent ideological frame.

Methodologically, the study offers a transferable model for analyzing multimodal religious and political discourse, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. The Czech case demonstrates how global pro-life narratives are locally re-signified in a secular, post-socialist context. By addressing challenges of multimodal coding, image polysemy, and reflexivity, the study underscores the need for systematic coding, triangulation, and ethical sensitivity.

In sum, integrating van Dijk's discourse theory with multimodal analysis shows how language and imagery legitimize ideologies, structure identities, and reproduce power. Everyday communication—from hashtags to medical artifacts—thus becomes a vehicle of ideological struggle, shaping public debate and influencing moral perceptions and policy.

Acknowledgment

This article is one of the research outputs associated with the doctoral project *Influential Movements and Their Strategic Construction of the Abortion Issue in the Czech Media Environment*, currently undertaken at Charles University. The author used AI-based language assistance (ChatGPT, OpenAI) to support stylistic and linguistic refinement of the manuscript. All content was verified, edited, and fully authored by the researcher.

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