







## Emotional Appeal and Reasoning in the Dear Thelma Column: A Rhetorical Analysis of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos

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### ABSTRACT

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This objective of the study was to analyse how Aristotle's three classical rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos were deployed in the Dear Thelma column published in The Star, one of Malaysia's most widely circulated English-language newspapers, to persuade and guide emotionally affected readers. A qualitative research design was employed, with 15 purposively selected write-ups analysed using Aristotle's rhetorical framework as the primary analytical lens. Data were coded and categorised systematically using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to ensure rigour and consistency throughout the analytical process. The findings revealed that all three rhetorical appeals were consistently present across the corpus, with pathos emerging as the most dominant strategy, reflected in Thelma's extensive use of emotional validation, empathetic affirmation, and dignity-restoring language directed at distressed readers. Ethos was prominently constructed through directive advice-giving, professional recommendations, moral authority, and epistemic transparency, while logos functioned as a complementary strategy grounding responses in cause-and-effect reasoning, conditional argumentation, and evidence-based analysis. Crucially, the three appeals operated not independently but in a mutually reinforcing manner, consistent with Aristotle's proposition that effective persuasion draws on all three modes in combination. These findings carry implications for

communication literacy, media discourse analysis, and the understanding of emotionally driven advisory communication in Malaysian English-language print media.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study offered an original rhetorical analysis of the Dear Thelma column in The Star by applying Aristotle's appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos within Malaysian print media discourse. It contributed to communication and media studies by highlighting how emotional advisory writing strategically combined persuasion, empathy, and reasoning to guide emotionally vulnerable readers effectively.

## 1. Introduction

Persuasive communication is deeply embedded in everyday human interaction, and the ability to influence others through language has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry. Rhetoric, the art of effective and persuasive communication, has been studied since ancient times, most notably through Aristotle's (1954 & 1959) classical framework comprising ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical reasoning). This framework remains one of the most enduring and widely applied tools for analysing persuasive discourse across diverse communicative contexts (Rapp, 2022).

These three rhetorical appeals have been examined across a broad range of genres and settings, including political speeches (Tsvetkova, 2025), crowdfunding campaigns (Alzaanin, 2025), university addresses (Ardine, 2025), and informal student communication (Ting, 2018; Krishnan et al. (2020), demonstrating their continued relevance as analytical lenses in contemporary communication research.

In recent years, scholarly interest in persuasive language has expanded significantly, with researchers investigating how emotional, credibility-based, and logic-driven appeals shape audience attitudes and responses across various media platforms. Lemanski and Villegas (2018) and Rapp (2022) demonstrated that the framing of emotional cues plays a significant role in determining how persuasive a message is perceived to be, while Ting (2018) highlighted that the interplay between ethos, pathos, and logos varies considerably depending on the communicative context and the relationship between the speaker and the audience. Together, these findings affirm that rhetorical strategies are not confined to formal or political discourse but permeate everyday communicative practices, including those found in print media.

One such communicative space that remains underexplored from a rhetorical perspective is the advice column. Advice columns occupy a unique discursive position in that they involve a public exchange between a columnist and a reader who is experiencing a deeply personal and emotionally sensitive dilemma. The columnist must simultaneously acknowledge the reader's emotional distress, establish authority and trustworthiness, and offer reasoned and practical guidance, functions that correspond directly to pathos, ethos, and logos respectively. The Dear Thelma column, published in The Star, one of Malaysia's most widely circulated English-language newspapers, represents a compelling yet understudied site of such persuasive communication. As a long-running advice column addressing a culturally diverse Malaysian readership, Dear Thelma provides a rich corpus through which the operation of classical rhetorical appeals in emotionally charged discourse can be systematically examined. As Makhafola et al. (2025) noted, communication literacy in the contemporary era must extend

beyond identifying credible sources to encompass a critical awareness of the persuasive strategies embedded in everyday media texts.

Therefore, the objective of the study was to analyse how Dear Thelma employs ethos, pathos, and logos to persuade and guide readers who are emotionally affected by personal dilemmas.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Aristotle's classical rhetorical theory, which identifies three foundational modes of persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos (Aristotle, 1954; Rapp, 2022). Originally outlined in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, these three appeals collectively explain how speakers and writers construct persuasive arguments and influence their audiences across diverse communicative contexts (Aristotle, 1954 & 1959).

Ethos refers to the credibility and trustworthiness that a speaker or writer projects to their audience. It encompasses the demonstration of expertise, moral character, and reliability, essentially answering the question of why an audience should trust the communicator (Aristotle, 1954; Ting, 2018). In the context of an advice column, ethos is established when the columnist positions themselves as a knowledgeable, experienced, and morally sound guide.

Pathos refers to the appeal to emotion, whereby a communicator seeks to evoke feelings such as empathy, sympathy, fear, or hope in the audience to make a message more persuasive (Aristotle, 1954; Alzaanin, 2025). Lemanski and Villegas (2018) affirmed that emotional framing significantly shapes how receptive an audience is to a given message. Logos refers to the appeal to logic and reason, typically expressed through structured arguments, evidence, facts, and rational explanations (Aristotle, 1954; Tsvetkova, 2025). Together, these three appeals provide a robust and comprehensive framework to analyse how persuasion operates in the Dear Thelma column.

### **2.2. Past Studies**

Scholarly interest in rhetorical strategies had grown considerably over the past decade, with researchers examining how ethos, pathos, and logos functioned across a variety of communicative genres and cultural contexts. Studies had explored these rhetorical appeals in settings ranging from political speeches (Tsvetkova, 2025) and crowdfunding campaigns (Alzaanin, 2025) to university addresses (Ardine, 2025) and informal student communication (Ting, 2018). While these studies differed in their focus and context, they shared a common concern with understanding how communicators used language strategically to persuade their audiences. A review of this body of literature revealed, however, that research had largely concentrated on formal and institutional genres, leaving everyday mediated discourse such as advice columns comparatively underexplored. This gap was particularly significant when considering emotionally driven advisory discourse in non-Western media contexts, such as the Malaysian print media landscape, where Dear Thelma in *The Star* served as a prominent and long-running public platform for personal guidance.

Early foundational work established that emotional appeals played a measurable role in shaping audience receptiveness to persuasive messages. Lemanski and Villegas (2018)

demonstrated that the framing of options within fear-based emotional appeals significantly influenced their persuasive effectiveness, concluding that audiences responded more favourably to messages that offered clear choices alongside emotional stimulation. Similarly, Ting (2018) examined how university students deployed ethos, logos, and pathos in informal requests, finding that pathos was most frequently employed, followed by ethos, suggesting that even in everyday, non-formal communicative contexts, speakers instinctively relied on emotional and credibility-based strategies to achieve persuasive outcomes. Together, these earlier studies established a productive foundation for understanding how rhetorical appeals operated beyond formal or political discourse, pointing toward their relevance in interpersonal and mediated communication alike.

Building on this foundation, more recent scholarships have extended rhetorical analysis into increasingly diverse genres and institutional contexts. Alzaanin (2025) conducted a corpus-based analysis of Gaza GoFundMe crowdfunding campaigns, revealing that pathos was the dominant rhetorical strategy employed by campaign creators to solicit donations from emotionally engaged audiences. The study found that appeals to suffering, urgency, and human dignity were systematically deployed alongside credibility markers, demonstrating that ethos and pathos frequently co-occurred in discourse directed at emotionally invested readers. Complementing this finding, Ardine (2025) analysed persuasion strategies in a university rector's speech in Indonesia, identifying that logos served as the primary rhetorical mode in institutional discourse, while pathos functioned as a secondary strategy to maintain audience engagement and emotional investment. These findings collectively suggested that the dominance of rhetorical appeals was closely tied to the communicative purpose, audience, and institutional context of a given text.

At the level of political discourse, Tsvetkova (2025) conducted a comparative rhetorical analysis of United States presidential campaign speeches between 2010 and 2025, finding that ethos and pathos were more consistently foregrounded than logos across both Democratic and Republican candidates. The study argued that political communicators prioritised credibility construction and emotional resonance over logical argumentation, particularly when addressing large and ideologically diverse audiences. This aligned with earlier meta-analytical findings by Huang and Wang (2023), who reviewed a substantial body of literature on artificial intelligence and human persuasion, concluding that emotionally framed messages tended to outperform purely logical appeals in terms of attitude change, regardless of whether the communicator was human or machine generated. Taken together, these studies reinforced the view that pathos and ethos were particularly powerful persuasive tools when communicators sought to connect with audiences on an affective level.

Despite this growing body of research, a notable gap remained in rhetorical literature. Existing studies had predominantly focused on formal genres such as political speeches (Tsvetkova, 2025), institutional addresses (Ardine, 2025), and digital fundraising campaigns (Alzaanin, 2025), while comparatively little attention had been directed toward advice column discourse as a site of rhetorical practice. Advice columns occupied a distinctive communicative position in that the columnist had to simultaneously validate the emotional experiences of distressed readers, establish personal credibility, and offer logically coherent guidance, a rhetorical challenge that was qualitatively different from those encountered in political or institutional contexts. Furthermore, while Ting (2018) and Lemanski and Villegas (2018) had examined rhetorical appeals in

interpersonal and emotional communication, neither study addressed the specific dynamics of public advisory discourse directed at emotionally vulnerable individuals in a media setting.

### **2.3. Research Gap**

This gap was particularly evident in the Malaysian print media context. To date, no study had systematically examined how rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos were employed in Malaysian English-language advice columns. The *Dear Thelma* column in *The Star* represented a rich and largely untapped corpus for such an investigation, given its long publication history, its culturally diverse readership, and its consistent engagement with readers navigating deeply personal and emotionally charged dilemmas. As Makhafole et al. (2025) argued, contemporary communication literacy required a critical awareness of the persuasive strategies embedded in everyday media texts. It was therefore both timely and necessary to examine how *Dear Thelma* constructed persuasive responses to emotionally affected readers through the strategic deployment of ethos, pathos, and logos.

## **3. Research Methods**

### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the rhetorical strategies deployed in the *Dear Thelma* column published in *The Star*. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for this study as the data consisted of written texts requiring interpretive and descriptive analysis rather than numerical measurement (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is particularly suited to investigating language use in naturalistic communicative contexts, as it allows the researcher to examine meaning, patterns, and strategies embedded within texts in depth and detail (Creswell, 2018). Given that the primary concern of this study was to identify and analyse how rhetorical appeals were linguistically constructed in advisory discourse, a qualitative framework provided the most fitting methodological foundation.

### **3.2. Data Collection**

Verbal consent to use the column's published content for academic research purposes was obtained from the *Dear Thelma* editor at *The Star* prior to data collection (Dear Thelma, 2024). The data were retrieved from the official online platform of *The Star*. A total of 15 write-ups published by *Dear Thelma* were purposively selected as the corpus for this study. Purposive sampling was employed as it allowed the researcher to select data that were most relevant and information-rich in relation to the research objective (Creswell, 2014). All selected write-ups were publicly available online and represented responses by the columnist to readers who had written in seeking personal guidance on emotionally sensitive matters.

### **3.3. Analytical Framework**

The data were analysed using Aristotle's (1954; 1959) classical rhetorical framework of ethos, pathos, and logos as the primary analytical lens. This framework was selected because it provides a systematic and theoretically grounded basis for identifying and categorising the persuasive strategies employed in written discourse (Aristotle, 1954;

1959; Rapp, 2022). Ethos was identified through linguistic markers of credibility, authority, and trustworthiness; pathos was identified through emotional language, empathetic expressions, and affective appeals; and logos was identified using logical reasoning, structured arguments, and evidence-based explanations. This tripartite framework enabled a comprehensive and structured examination of how Thelma persuaded emotionally affected readers through her written responses.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed as the method of data analysis in this study. The 15 selected write-ups were coded and categorised according to the three rhetorical categories defined by Aristotle (1954; 1959), namely ethos, pathos, and logos. The coding and categorisation process was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which facilitated systematic organisation, retrieval, and management of the textual data. NVivo was employed to ensure that the coding process was conducted in a rigorous, transparent, and organised manner, allowing patterns and themes across the data to be identified consistently and reliably.

### **3.5. Reliability and Validity**

To ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, the data were coded and categorised systematically using NVivo, which provided a structured and auditable record of all coding decisions. The coding scheme was grounded in the established definitions of ethos, pathos, and logos as outlined by Aristotle (1954; 1959), ensuring theoretical consistency throughout the analytical process. By anchoring the coding framework in a well-established rhetorical theory and employing NVivo as a systematic coding tool, this study maintained a high degree of analytical rigour and credibility in its findings.

## **4. Analysis and Findings**

This section presented the rhetorical analysis of 15 selected write-ups from the Dear Thelma column published in *The Star*. The data were coded and categorised according to Aristotle's (1954; 1959) three rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos using NVivo. The findings were presented thematically under each rhetorical category, with the textual evidence presented in tabular form first, followed by interpretation and discussion supported by in-text citations.

### **4.1. Ethos: Appeals to Credibility and Authority**

The analysis of the selected issues revealed that ethos was prominently and consistently constructed across Thelma's responses through several key strategies. Aristotle (1954; 1959) defined ethos as the credibility and trustworthiness that a communicator projected to persuade an audience, and this was clearly evident in the way Thelma positioned herself as a knowledgeable, experienced, and morally principled advisor throughout the corpus.

As shown in Table 1, one of the most prominent strategies through which ethos was established was Thelma's use of direct and authoritative advice-giving language. In Issue 1, Thelma recommended that the reader buy self-help books and attend a couples workshop, while in Issue 2 she specified that the reader should seek a therapist holding

at least a master's degree in psychology or counselling. These directive and professionally informed recommendations demonstrated a clear command of knowledge in the domain of mental health and interpersonal relationships, which was consistent with Ting's (2018) observation that ethos in advisory contexts was frequently constructed through the demonstration of expertise and specialised knowledge that positioned the advisor as a trustworthy and informed guide.

Table 1: Excerpts Illustrating Ethos

Issue	Excerpt	Rhetorical Function
Issue 1	'Buy some self-help books on this issue. Take a couples workshop together.'	Projected expertise and authority through directive advice-giving
Issue 2	'Look for a therapist who has at least a Masters degree in psychology or counselling. Get one therapist for you and one for your husband.'	Demonstrated familiarity with professional mental health standards
Issue 3	'A good man does not walk away from a pregnant wife.'	Established moral authority and ethical credibility
Issue 3	'If he wasn't ready to accept consequences, he should have kept it in his trousers.'	Reinforced moral positioning and principled judgement
Issue 4	'Also, and this is purely speculation on my part.'	Projected intellectual honesty and epistemic transparency
Issue 5	'My advice is to consult the best divorce lawyer you can find and very quietly find out what your rights are.'	Demonstrated practical and legal expertise
Issue 6	'Set boundaries, don't engage or escalate fights, and recognise this is a life-long situation.'	Projected experienced and structured practical guidance

Ethos was also strongly constructed through Thelma's explicit moral positioning, as evident in Issue 3, where she stated that a good man did not walk away from a pregnant wife and that a man who was not ready to accept consequences should have behaved more responsibly. These morally authoritative judgements positioned Thelma as an ethically principled advisor whose guidance was grounded in widely shared social values and standards of decent behaviour. As Alzaanin (2025) noted, the deployment of moral credibility markers alongside ethos-based appeals served to reinforce the communicator's authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the audience, particularly when the audience was emotionally distressed and in need of principled guidance.

Furthermore, Thelma's acknowledgement of the limits of her own knowledge in Issue 4, where she explicitly noted that her interpretation was speculation on her part, functioned as a particularly effective ethos-building strategy. Rather than undermining her credibility, this transparent admission of uncertainty reinforced her trustworthiness and intellectual honesty. This was consistent with Rapp's (2022) argument that credibility was strengthened when a communicator demonstrated openness and epistemic humility, as audiences tended to perceive such admissions as markers of sincerity and integrity rather than weakness. Similarly, Tsvetkova (2025) argued that communicators who balanced confident advice-giving with acknowledged uncertainty were more effective in building lasting credibility with diverse and emotionally engaged audiences, a pattern that was clearly observable in Thelma's advisory discourse throughout the corpus.

## 4.2. Pathos: Appeals to Emotion

The analysis revealed that pathos was the most extensive and consistently deployed rhetorical appeal across the corpus, reflecting the inherently emotional nature of the advisory discourse in *Dear Thelma*. Aristotle (1954; 1959) described pathos as appealing to emotion, whereby a communicator sought to evoke feelings such as empathy, sympathy, hope, or concern in the audience to make a message more persuasive, and this was clear in the way Thelma crafted her responses to emotionally distressed readers.

As shown in Table 2, one of the most prominent strategies through which pathos was constructed was Thelma's use of empathetic language that directly validated the reader's emotional experience. In Issue 2, Thelma explicitly acknowledged the reader's anger and frustration before offering guidance, demonstrating that she understood and respected the reader's emotional state. This strategy of emotional validation prior to advice-giving was consistent with Lemanski and Villegas's (2018) argument that emotionally attuned framing that acknowledged audience distress significantly enhanced the receptiveness of a message, as readers who felt understood were more likely to be open to the guidance that followed.

Table 2: Excerpts Illustrating Pathos

Issue	Excerpt	Rhetorical Function
Issue 1	'It's not easy to untangle all these threads, and you'll have to consider and possibly change your attitudes and beliefs. I do wish you lots of luck.'	Expressed empathy and emotional encouragement
Issue 2	'I can see why you are angry with him, and I understand why you feel it may be easier to walk out.'	Directly validated the reader's emotional experience
Issue 2	'Make sure that while you heal yourself, your kids are okay. They need you!'	Appealed to maternal responsibility and emotional urgency
Issue 3	'You deserve better.'	Affirmed the reader's dignity and self-worth
Issue 3	'Living with a partner who behaves badly can have a nasty effect on your self-esteem and trust.'	Demonstrated emotional sensitivity toward psychological impact
Issue 4	'I truly think you've nothing to worry about.'	Offered emotional reassurance and comfort
Issue 4	'Take this as an opportunity to celebrate what you have and to strengthen your relationship. Date as if you're kids again.'	Projected hope and positive emotional reinforcement
Issue 5	'You deserve to be happy.'	Restored the reader's sense of self-worth and dignity
Issue 5	'You don't have a marriage; he is off with his mistress and you're not in his life. It's no wonder you no longer respect, love and trust him.'	Validated the reader's emotional response to betrayal
Issue 6	'Let me ask you a question: You've got another 40 years of marriage before you. How do you feel about that?'	Used rhetorical question to evoke emotional reflection

Issue 6	'So please, don't be in a rush, okay? Think before you act.'	Expressed care and concern for the reader's emotional wellbeing
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Pathos was also powerfully constructed through short but emotionally affirming statements directed at readers whose sense of self-worth had been damaged by their experiences. In Issue 3, Thelma told the reader that she deserved better, and in Issue 5, that she deserved to be happy. These brief yet emotionally resonant affirmations sought to restore the reader's dignity and sense of personal value, reflecting Alzaanin's (2025) observation that appeals to human dignity were particularly effective in emotionally charged discourse as they resonated deeply with audiences who had experienced betrayal, humiliation, or mistreatment. Furthermore, Ardine (2025) found that pathos frequently functioned to maintain emotional engagement even in contexts where practical guidance was the primary communicative goal, a pattern that was clear in Thelma's consistent use of encouraging and affirming language throughout her responses.

Thelma also employed pathos through emotionally provocative rhetorical questions, as evident in Issue 6, where she invited the reader to consider how she felt about spending the next 40 years in her current marriage. This rhetorical question served to foreground the emotional weight of the reader's long-term situation and prompted deep personal reflection, consistent with Tsvetkova's (2025) observation that rhetorical questions were frequently deployed in persuasive discourse to evoke emotional responses and encourage audience self-reflection. Additionally, the appeal to maternal responsibility in Issue 2, where Thelma urged the reader to ensure her children were cared for while she healed, demonstrated the effectiveness of pathos when it resonated with the audience's deeply held personal values and responsibilities, as Lemanski and Villegas (2018) had similarly observed in their study of fear-based emotional appeals.

### 4.3. Logos: Appeals to Logic and Reason

The analysis revealed that logos was consistently deployed across the corpus as a complementary but important rhetorical strategy that grounded Thelma's advice in rational reasoning, evidence-based explanations, and logical analysis of the reader's situation. Aristotle (1954; 1959) defined logos as the appeal to logic and reason, typically expressed through structured arguments, information, and rational explanations, and this was clear in the systematic and analytical manner in which Thelma approached each reader's problem before offering recommendations.

As shown in Table 3, one of the most prominent manifestations of logos was Thelma's use of cause-and-effect reasoning to explain the dynamics of the readers' situations. In Issue 1, Thelma offered a structured list of possible explanations for the reader's marital difficulties, including stress, physical illness, and communication difficulties, demonstrating clear analytical reasoning that provided the reader with a rational framework for understanding her situation. This was consistent with Ardine's (2025) finding that logos-based strategies in advisory discourse frequently took the form of explanatory reasoning that guided audiences toward a more informed and logical understanding of their circumstances, enabling them to make better-considered decisions.

Table 3: Excerpts Illustrating Logos

Issue	Excerpt	Rhetorical Function
Issue 1	'But, if you had six years of a good sex life, followed by an abrupt break, it's less likely to be libido or style. Apart from the dark scenario above, common reasons include stress, physical illness, erectile dysfunction, difficulties in communicating needs, and more.'	Employed cause-and-effect reasoning to explain the reader's situation
Issue 1	'Once you learn to talk openly, it may be that you resolve your difficulties. Or, you may decide that you are fundamentally incompatible and that the marriage can't work.'	Presented conditional logical reasoning and structured options
Issue 2	'It's difficult to make decisions when you're depressed, because that condition affects your thinking. Mostly, it casts a negative light on everything.'	Provided rational and evidence-informed explanation of depression
Issue 2	'A good marriage is about partnership and shared responsibility.'	Applied widely accepted social reasoning and norms
Issue 3	'I don't think it matters whether he has cheated on you or not. He has made it clear that he is not invested in this relationship.'	Employed logical evaluation of evidence to guide the reader
Issue 3	'Can counselling help? It is possible to retrieve a relationship that started well but that soured. But yours started off badly and then got worse. There is no foundation.'	Demonstrated structured analytical reasoning
Issue 4	'Okay, sudden changes in behaviour such as a new interest in dressing up, getting in shape, cosmetic surgery and so on, can indicate that a partner is cheating because it's all dating behaviour geared at attracting others.'	Used deductive reasoning to interpret behavioural evidence
Issue 5	'My dear, look at the facts. Your husband blocked you from his life and as proof of his cheating, gave you an STD.'	Employed factual and evidence-based recapitulation of circumstances
Issue 5	'Once you know how much a divorce would cost you, what you'd likely end up with, and how long it would take to resolve, you can make better decisions.'	Presented structured logical options to empower rational decision-making
Issue 6	'Generally speaking, the first year of marriage is horrible. I have no idea why, but there is something about that promise 'forever' that freaks most of us out.'	Applied generalised social reasoning and shared human experience
Issue 6	'Also, don't have kids until you are certain you are in this relationship for life. Because once you have kids, your marriage is as much for them as it is for you.'	Employed rational and consequential reasoning to guide the reader

Logos was also strongly evident in Thelma's use of conditional reasoning, whereby she presented readers with structured if-then scenarios that outlined possible outcomes based on their choices. In Issue 1, she presented two possible outcomes depending on whether the reader chose to communicate openly with her husband, while in Issue 5, she advised the reader to gather legal and financial information before making any decisions about divorce. These structured presentations of logical options were consistent with Ting's (2018) observation that logos in advisory contexts frequently

functioned to empower audiences by presenting them with clear and rational pathways toward informed action, reducing the paralysing effect of emotional distress on decision-making.

Furthermore, Thelma's direct and factual recapitulation of the reader's circumstances in Issue 5, where she summarised the husband's infidelity and its consequences in clear and unambiguous terms, demonstrated a particularly effective deployment of logos as a persuasive tool. By presenting the reader with a logical and evidence-based summary of her situation, Thelma guided her toward a rational conclusion about her options without imposing a directive judgment. This was consistent with Huang and Wang's (2023) finding that logically framed messages grounded in factual evidence tended to be highly persuasive and credible, as they enabled audiences to arrive at rational conclusions through their own reasoning process rather than through external pressure.

Additionally, Tsvetkova (2025) argued that while logos was less dominant than pathos and ethos in emotionally charged discourse, it served a crucial function in lending analytical weight and credibility to persuasive messages, a finding that was clearly supported by the complementary role logos played alongside pathos and ethos in Thelma's advisory responses throughout the corpus.

#### **4.4. Summary of Findings**

The analysis revealed that all three rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos were present across the selected *Dear Thelma* write-ups, though they varied in frequency and function depending on the nature and emotional intensity of each issue. Pathos emerged as the most dominant rhetorical appeal overall, reflecting the emotionally sensitive nature of the advisory genre and the emotional vulnerability of the readers who wrote to the column, a finding that was consistent with Alzaanin (2025) and Lemanski and Villegas (2018), both of whom observed that pathos was the most frequently deployed rhetorical appeal in discourse directed at emotionally invested and vulnerable audiences.

Ethos was consistently deployed to establish Thelma's credibility, moral authority, and expertise, aligning with Ting (2018) and Rapp (2022), who argued that credibility construction was a fundamental component of effective advisory communication.

Logos provided the rational and analytical scaffolding through which practical and reasoned guidance was delivered, consistent with Ardine (2025) and Huang and Wang (2023), who found that logically framed messages complemented emotional and credibility-based appeals in producing persuasive and credible discourse.

Taken together, these findings suggested that Thelma's persuasive effectiveness in responding to emotionally affected readers was achieved through the strategic and complementary deployment of all three rhetorical appeals, with pathos serving as the dominant mode of emotional engagement, supported by ethos and logos as reinforcing persuasive strategies.

### **5. Discussion**

This study examined the rhetorical strategies employed by Thelma in responding to emotionally affected readers in the *Dear Thelma* column published in *The Star*. The

analysis revealed that Thelma consistently deployed all three rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos across the selected write-ups, with pathos emerging as the most dominant rhetorical strategy, followed by ethos and logos respectively. These findings were discussed in relation to past studies to situate the results within the broader body of rhetorical research.

### **5.1. Pathos as the Dominant Rhetorical Appeal**

The finding that pathos was the most extensively deployed rhetorical appeal in the *Dear Thelma* column was consistent with and supported by several past studies that had examined emotional appeals across diverse communicative genres and contexts. Alzaanin (2025) similarly found that pathos was the dominant rhetorical strategy in Gaza GoFundMe crowdfunding campaigns, where campaign creators systematically deployed appeals to suffering, urgency, and human dignity to engage emotionally invested audiences and motivate them toward action. The parallel between Alzaanin's (2025) findings and those of the present study suggested that pathos tended to dominate in discourse directed at audiences who were emotionally distressed or personally invested in the subject matter, regardless of the specific genre or communicative context involved.

This finding was further corroborated by Lemanski and Villegas (2018), who demonstrated that emotional framing played a significant and measurable role in shaping audience receptiveness to persuasive messages. Their study established that audiences responded most favourably to messages that first acknowledged their emotional state before presenting practical options, a pattern that was clearly evident in Thelma's consistent practice of validating readers' feelings and experiences prior to offering guidance. The alignment between Lemanski and Villegas's (2018) findings and those of the present study reinforced the argument that emotional validation was not merely a stylistic choice but a strategically important rhetorical device that significantly enhanced the persuasive impact of advisory discourse directed at emotionally vulnerable individuals.

Furthermore, Ting (2018) found that pathos was the most frequently employed rhetorical appeal in university students' informal requests, followed by ethos, suggesting that even in everyday non-formal communicative contexts, speakers instinctively relied on emotional appeals as their primary persuasive strategy. This finding was particularly relevant to the present study as it suggested that the dominance of pathos in *Dear Thelma* was not an isolated phenomenon specific to the advice column genre but rather reflected a broader human tendency to prioritise emotional connection and empathy when communicating in interpersonal and personally sensitive contexts. Taken together, these studies collectively affirmed that pathos was a particularly powerful and universally deployed rhetorical tool in discourse where the communicator sought to connect with an emotionally affected audience on a deeply personal and affective level.

### **5.2. Ethos as a Credibility-Building Strategy**

The analysis revealed that ethos was consistently and prominently deployed across all six issues examined in this study, functioning as a fundamental strategy through which Thelma established her authority, expertise, and moral credibility as an advisor. This

finding was consistent with several past studies that had examined the role of ethos in persuasive discourse across different genres and communicative contexts.

Ting (2018) observed that ethos was the second most frequently deployed rhetorical appeal in informal communicative contexts, typically expressed through the demonstration of knowledge, expertise, and trustworthiness. This was clearly reflected in Thelma's advisory responses, where ethos was constructed through directive advice-giving language, professional recommendations, and explicit moral judgements that positioned her as a knowledgeable and principled guide. Similarly, Tsvetkova (2025) found that ethos was one of the most consistently foregrounded rhetorical appeals in United States presidential campaign discourse, arguing that communicators who prioritised credibility construction were more effective in persuading ideologically and emotionally diverse audiences. This finding was particularly relevant to the present study as Thelma's readership was similarly diverse, comprising individuals from different cultural, religious, and social backgrounds who required a columnist whose credibility and moral authority transcended specific cultural or ideological boundaries.

Alzaanin (2025) further noted that ethos and pathos frequently co-occurred in discourse directed at emotionally invested audiences, with credibility markers serving to reinforce the legitimacy and trustworthiness of emotionally charged appeals. This pattern was clearly observable in the *Dear Thelma* corpus, where Thelma consistently combined empathetic emotional validation with authoritative and morally grounded guidance, ensuring that her responses were perceived as both compassionate and credible. Rapp (2022) additionally affirmed that credibility was strengthened when a communicator demonstrated epistemic humility and a willingness to acknowledge the boundaries of their own knowledge, a strategy that was evident in Thelma's occasional acknowledgement of the speculative nature of her interpretations. This transparent admission of uncertainty, rather than undermining her authority, appeared to reinforce the perception of her as an honest and trustworthy advisor, consistent with Rapp's (2022) theoretical position on the relationship between epistemic openness and credibility construction.

### 5.3. Logos as a Complementary Persuasive Strategy

The analysis revealed that logos, while less dominant than pathos and ethos, was consistently present across the corpus and served an important complementary function in grounding Thelma's advice in rational reasoning, evidence-based analysis, and structured logical argumentation. This finding was broadly consistent with past studies that had examined the role of logos in persuasive discourse, though it also highlighted some important distinctions in the way logos functioned in advisory discourse compared to other genres.

Ardine (2025) found that logos was the primary rhetorical mode in institutional discourse such as university rector speeches, serving as the dominant strategy through which authority and expertise were communicated to an audience. However, in the present study, logos played a secondary rather than primary role, functioning as a complementary strategy that provided the rational scaffolding for advice that was primarily emotionally and credibility driven. This difference was likely attributable to the distinct communicative purposes and audience characteristics of the two genres. While institutional discourse was primarily concerned with conveying information and demonstrating institutional authority, advisory discourse in the *Dear Thelma* column

was primarily concerned with addressing the emotional needs of distressed readers, making pathos and ethos more central to its persuasive effectiveness.

Huang and Wang (2023) observed that logically framed messages grounded in factual evidence tended to be highly persuasive and credible, particularly when they enabled audiences to arrive at rational conclusions through their own reasoning process. This finding was reflected in Thelma's consistent practice of presenting readers with clear and factual summaries of their situations, as well as structured if-then scenarios that outlined possible outcomes based on their choices, empowering them to make informed and rational decisions rather than acting impulsively out of emotional distress. Ting (2018) similarly noted that logos in advisory contexts frequently functioned to present structured options that guided the audience toward considered and rational action, a pattern that was clearly evident in Thelma's use of conditional reasoning and cause-and-effect analysis across the selected issues.

Tsvetkova (2025) argued that while logos was less dominant than pathos and ethos in emotionally charged discourse, it served a crucial function in lending analytical weight and intellectual credibility to persuasive messages, preventing them from being perceived as purely emotional or subjective. This observation was particularly relevant to the *Dear Thelma* corpus, where the consistent presence of logos alongside pathos and ethos suggested that Thelma was aware of the need to balance emotional sensitivity with rational analysis in order to produce responses that were perceived as both compassionate and credible. Without the grounding effect of logos, Thelma's responses might have been perceived as overly subjective or emotionally driven, potentially undermining their persuasive effectiveness and credibility in the eyes of readers who sought not only emotional validation but also practical and rational guidance.

#### **5.4. The Interplay of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos in Advisory Discourse**

A particularly significant finding of this study was that ethos, pathos, and logos did not operate independently but rather functioned in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner across Thelma's responses. This finding was consistent with Aristotle's (1954; 1959) original theoretical framework, which proposed that the most effective persuasive discourse drew on all three rhetorical appeals in combination rather than relying exclusively on any single mode of persuasion. The present study provided empirical support for this theoretical proposition in the specific context of advice column discourse, demonstrating that Thelma's persuasive effectiveness was achieved through the strategic interweaving of emotional validation, credibility construction, and rational analysis rather than through the deployment of any single rhetorical strategy in isolation.

Alzaanin (2025) similarly observed that ethos and pathos frequently co-occurred in discourse directed at emotionally invested audiences, with the two appeals working together to create a persuasive effect that was greater than either could achieve independently. This co-occurrence was clearly evident in the *Dear Thelma* corpus, where Thelma consistently combined empathetic emotional appeals with authoritative and morally grounded guidance, ensuring that her responses were perceived as both compassionate and credible. Ardine (2025) further noted that even in contexts where logos was the primary rhetorical mode, pathos served as an important secondary strategy for maintaining audience engagement and emotional investment, suggesting

that the interplay between rhetorical appeals was a consistent feature of effective persuasive discourse across diverse genres and communicative contexts.

Lemanski and Villegas (2018) argued that the most effective persuasive messages were those that combined emotional framing with clear and structured options, a finding that was clearly reflected in Thelma's advisory approach, which consistently paired empathetic emotional validation with rational analysis and practical recommendations. This complementary deployment of all three rhetorical appeals suggested that Thelma had developed an intuitively sophisticated rhetorical strategy that was well-suited to the unique communicative demands of the advice column genre, where the columnist was required to simultaneously address the emotional, credibility-related, and rational needs of a diverse and emotionally vulnerable readership.

## 6. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study carried several important implications for the understanding of persuasive communication in Malaysian English-language print media. First, the dominance of pathos in *Dear Thelma* suggested that emotionally driven advisory discourse was particularly effective when directed at readers who were experiencing personal distress, as emotional validation and empathetic engagement appeared to be the primary factors that made Thelma's responses persuasive and credible to her readers. This finding was consistent with Lemanski and Villegas (2018) and Alzaanin (2025), both of whom had demonstrated the central role of emotional appeals in persuasive discourse directed at emotionally invested audiences.

Second, the consistent deployment of ethos across all issues suggested that credibility construction was a fundamental and non-negotiable component of effective advisory discourse, as readers who were emotionally distressed and personally vulnerable required an advisor whose authority, expertise, and moral integrity they could trust. This finding aligned with Ting (2018) and Rapp (2022), who had similarly identified credibility construction as a core feature of effective persuasive communication in advisory and interpersonal contexts.

Third, the complementary role of logos suggested that rational reasoning and evidence-based analysis, while less emotionally engaging than pathos, played an important supporting role in lending credibility and analytical weight to advisory responses, preventing them from being perceived as purely subjective or emotionally driven. As Huang and Wang (2023) and Ardine (2025) had observed, logically framed messages that complemented emotional and credibility-based appeals tended to be more persuasive and credible than those that relied exclusively on any single rhetorical mode. Finally, as Makhafole et al. (2025) argued, contemporary communication literacy required a critical awareness of the persuasive strategies embedded in everyday media texts, and the findings of this study contributed to that awareness by providing a detailed and empirically grounded account of how rhetorical appeals functioned in one of Malaysia's most widely read English-language advice columns (Zhu et al., 2025).

## 7. Conclusion

This study investigated the rhetorical strategies employed by Thelma in the *Dear Thelma* column published in *The Star*, with a specific focus on how ethos, pathos, and logos were deployed to persuade and guide emotionally affected readers. Grounded in Aristotle's

(1954; 1959) classical rhetorical framework, the analysis of 15 selected write-ups revealed that all three rhetorical appeals were consistently present across the corpus, with pathos emerging as the most dominant strategy, followed by ethos and logos respectively.

The dominance of pathos reflected the unique communicative demands of the advice column genre, where readers were typically experiencing deeply personal and emotionally distressing situations that required emotional validation, empathy, and reassurance before practical guidance could be effectively received (Lemanski & Villegas, 2018). Ethos was consistently deployed to establish Thelma's authority, moral integrity, and expertise, ensuring that emotionally vulnerable readers perceived her as a trustworthy and credible advisor (Ting, 2018; Rapp, 2022). Logos, while less dominant, served an important complementary function by grounding Thelma's advice in rational reasoning and evidence-based analysis, preventing her responses from being perceived as purely emotional or subjective (Ardine, 2025; Huang & Wang, 2023). Taken together, these findings demonstrated that the power of language in advisory discourse lay in the strategic and complementary interweaving of all three rhetorical appeals to simultaneously address the emotional, credibility-related, and rational needs of a diverse and emotionally vulnerable readership, consistent with Aristotle's (1954; 1959) original theoretical proposition that the most effective persuasive discourse drew on all three appeals in combination.

For further studies, future researchers could expand the corpus to include a larger sample of write-ups and apply complementary theoretical frameworks such as Appraisal Theory to provide a more linguistically detailed account of how emotional meaning was constructed in advisory discourse (Alzaanin, 2025). Comparative studies examining rhetorical strategies across advice columns in different cultural and linguistic contexts could also yield valuable insights into whether the dominance of pathos observed in this study was a universal feature of emotionally driven advisory discourse or whether it varied across cultural and communicative contexts (Tsvetkova, 2025). As Makhafola et al. (2025) argued, a critical awareness of the persuasive strategies embedded in everyday media texts remained essential for contemporary communication literacy, and future research in this area would contribute meaningfully to that broader understanding (Islam et al. 2023)

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the administrative authority of The Star. Permission to conduct the research was officially approved prior to the commencement of the study, ensuring that all procedures complied with the required ethical standards and guidelines.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. They further confirm that no competing financial or personal relationships have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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