Abortion Attitudes
(Media Content, User Comments)

AUTHOR
Nicola Döring

KEYWORDS
abortion, activism, attitudes, feminism, reproductive health, reproductive rights

FUNDING
This entry was created as part of a larger research project lead by the author on the representation of sexual and reproductive health issues on social media, led by the author and funded by the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) from 2023 to 2026. The name of the project is EMSA (“Erster Mal, Menstruation und Schwangerschaftsabbruch in Sozialen Medien” = sexual debut, menstruation, and abortion on social media).

BRIEF DESCRIPTION
The concept of „abortion attitudes“ refers to an individual's or group's beliefs, opinions, and feelings regarding the practice of abortion (Jelen & Wilcox, 2003). Abortion here addresses abortion care in the form of medical (i.e., drug-induced) or surgical termination of an unwanted pregnancy, usually before the fetus is considered viable (i.e., able to survive outside the womb). People's attitudes towards abortion care can vary widely and are influenced by factors such as cultural, religious, moral, and personal beliefs, societal norms and values, as well as personal experiences and media representations (Adamczyk, Kim & Dillon, 2020; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht, 2002). Abortion and abortion attitudes are widely represented in the media, this includes news media, fictional media, and social media (Conti & Cahill, 2017).

Attitudes towards abortion as they are held in the population and represented in the media are polarized and can be categorized broadly as pro-choice versus pro-life (Krolzik-Matthei, 2019):

- The **pro-choice** or **pro-abortion** attitude focuses on the pregnant woman/person and acknowledges her human rights to life, health and self-determination. Hence, the pro-choice attitude demands access to legal and safe abortions as a reproductive right for all women PERSONS who seek abortion care as a reproductive health service. The pro-choice position morally accepts abortions and politically favors the legalization of abortions.

- The **pro-life** or **anti-abortion** attitude focuses on the embryo (weeks 0 to 9 of the pregnancy) or the fetus (from week 10) and acknowledges its right to life. Hence, the pro-life attitude demands complete prohibition or at least heavy restriction of abortions, regardless of the life, health, and self-determination of the pregnant woman/person. The pro-life position morally condemns abortions and politically favors the criminalization of abortions in most or all cases.

These two attitudes often manifest as general principles (or **absolutist positions**). But they also manifest in various shades of grey (situational positions), with some individuals and media representations supporting abortion under specific circumstances (such as cases of rape, incest, or severe fetal abnormalities) while opposing it in others (Rye & Underhill, 2020).

In the context of ongoing political debates surrounding the legalization or criminalization of abortion (e.g., the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the USA in 2022), measuring attitudes towards
 abortion in media content remains a relevant and timely research topic, especially when it comes to popular and growing social media platforms such as TikTok (Wu & Byler, 2022).

**FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

One line of research investigates the various values underlying pro-life/pro-abortion and pro-choice/anti-abortion attitudes as represented in different media. This research approach employs theories from religion, moral philosophy, medical history, and/or feminism to extract the distinct arguments, frames, and metaphors used to defend and rationalize pro-choice versus pro-life attitudes (e.g., Brysk & Yang, 2023).

Another line of research examines the associations between media representations of abortion attitudes on the one side and the audience’s attitudes about abortion on the other side (Döring, 2023; Döring & Kubitza, 2023; Pleasure, Becker, Johnson, Broussard & Lindberg, 2023), particularly in the context of pro- or anti-abortion campaigns (e.g., Reidy & Suiter, 2023) and online abortion education (Duggan, 2023). One relevant theory often applied in this field is the social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986, 2009), which explains how media images of abortion can influence the audience’s perceptions of abortions. Additionally, theories of persuasion and education are applicable in this context.

**REFERENCES/COMBINATION WITH OTHER METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

Manual and automated content analyses of news media, fictional media, social media content, and social media user comments are essential for monitoring the potentially changing prevalence of various abortion attitudes in the public media sphere. These media content analyses can be combined with population surveys to explore associations between published opinion and public opinion on abortion. Furthermore, experimental studies are useful for directly measuring how recipients perceive and evaluate different media representations of abortion attitudes, and whether and how these representations can affect their own attitudes toward abortion.
Table 1. Example studies for manual content analyses (Döring, 2023; Döring & Kubitza, 2023).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Material</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Operationalization (excerpt)</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$N = 167$ top ranked German-language abortion videos on YouTube ($n = 75$) and TikTok ($n = 92$)</td>
<td>Type of Social Media Content Creator</td>
<td>Polytomous variable “content creator type” (1: media professional, 2: health professional, 3: political/religious actor, 4: lay person)</td>
<td>$n = 117$ pre-test sample Cohen’s Kappa = .84 Gwet’s AC1 = .88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abortion Attitude in Social Media Content</td>
<td>Polytomous variable “abortion attitude represented in YouTube/TikTok video” (1: pro-choice or pro-abortion [video predominantly argues in favor of legalization of abortion and/or the rights of the pregnant person], 2: pro-life or anti-abortion [video predominantly argues in favor of criminalization of abortion and/or the rights of the embryo/fetus], 3: ambivalent [video partly argues in favor of both pro-choice and pro-life positions; e.g., video covers both the attitude of a pro-life and a pro-choice activist], 4: neutral [video neither argues for or against the legalization or criminalization of abortions; e.g., video explains the procedure of surgical termination of an unwanted pregnancy and does not address moral or political evaluations], 5: unclear [the abortion attitude represented in the video remains unclear])</td>
<td>$n = 117$ pre-test sample Cohen’s Kappa = .66 Gwet’s AC1 = .82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N = 807$ most liked on-topic public user comments related to the $N = 167$ top ranked German-language abortion videos on YouTube ($n = 326$) and TikTok ($n = 481$)</td>
<td>Type of Commenting Social Media User</td>
<td>Cannot be identified and coded due to practical and ethical considerations</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abortion Attitude in Social Media User Comments</td>
<td>Polytomous variable “abortion attitude represented in YouTube/TikTok user comments” (1: pro-choice / pro-abortion, 2: pro-life / anti-abortion, 3: ambivalent, 4: neutral, 5: unclear). Operationalization of the abortion attitudes in social media comments follows the same scheme used for social media videos (as described above).</td>
<td>$n = 300$ pre-test sample Cohen’s Kappa = .55 Gwet’s AC1 = .81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


