



Framing Propaganda Narratives on X and Facebook during the 2026 United States-Israel-Iran Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Background: On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched coordinated air and missile strikes against Iran, targeting military installations, nuclear facilities, and strategic command centres in Tehran and other cities. The strikes were undertaken amid escalating tensions over Iran's nuclear programme and growing security concerns arising from Iran's regional military activities and support for allied armed groups. The conflict generated extensive information flows across social media platforms, where competing actors sought to shape public opinion through propaganda narratives.

Objective: This study examined how social media platforms were used to frame propaganda narratives during the United States–Israel–Iran conflict between 28 February and 31 March 2026.

Method: The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis and survey research. A total of 257 social media posts related to the conflict were analysed, while 400 respondents participated in the survey.

Results: The findings revealed that X and Facebook played a significant role in shaping propaganda narratives during the United States–Israel–Iran conflict through emotionally driven framing, misinformation, and repeated digital amplification. The platforms also facilitated the rapid dissemination of competing narratives that influenced users' perceptions of the conflict.

Conclusion: The study concludes that social media platforms play a pivotal role in constructing, amplifying, and sustaining propaganda narratives during contemporary armed conflicts.

Unique Contribution: The study extends the literature on digital propaganda by demonstrating how AI-generated visuals, manipulated content, and coordinated online narratives intensified the circulation of propaganda and shaped audience engagement during the United States–Israel–Iran conflict.

Recommendations: The study recommends strengthening media literacy programmes, enhancing independent fact-checking mechanisms, promoting responsible platform governance, and encouraging balanced media framing to improve public resilience against propaganda and misinformation during armed conflicts.

Keywords: Social media, framing, misinformation, digital propaganda, United States–Israel–Iran conflict.



INTRODUCTION

The media has the responsibility of providing news and covering a wide variety of issues, including events and developments around the world that are of public interest and benefit to society (Oparaugo, 2021). Social media has revolutionised how people engage with information by providing a platform for real-time communication, public discourse, and mobilisation. With the widespread availability of smartphones and internet access, individuals can instantly share news, opinions, and experiences, often without the editorial oversight associated with traditional media. While this has empowered citizens to express their views and concerns, it has also contributed to the rapid spread of misinformation, propaganda, and the escalation of conflicts.

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched coordinated air and missile strikes against Iran, targeting military installations, nuclear facilities, and strategic command centres in Tehran and other cities. One of the initial strikes reportedly killed Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who had led the country since 1989 (Shah & Kawa, 2026). In response to the joint attacks by the United States and Israel, Iran launched waves of ballistic missiles and drone attacks against Gulf countries allied with the United States and Israel, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman.

Iran subsequently overhauled its social media strategy as part of an extensive information campaign launched in response to the military attacks by the United States and Israel (Tait, 2026). Despite operating under decades of sanctions imposed and maintained by Washington, Iran managed to confront two of the world's most technologically advanced militaries, resulting in what appeared to be a prolonged military stalemate (Abubakar, 2026).

According to Al-Shammouri (2026), media restrictions in the United States did not take the form of direct censorship, as observed in more authoritarian systems. Instead, pressure was exerted through political and regulatory channels, alongside efforts to shape public narratives surrounding the conflict with Iran. In Israel, media restrictions during the conflict took a different form, characterised by strict military censorship, restrictions on journalists' activities, and limitations on reporting sensitive military operations. These measures included banning live broadcasts during missile sirens, prohibiting the filming of missile interceptions or impact sites near security installations, and preventing the publication of exact impact locations or the reposting of videos from social media without prior approval (Al-Shammouri, 2026).

In contrast, Iran adopted a model based on direct control of information flow. Within hours of the commencement of the United States–Israeli attacks, Iranian authorities imposed a nationwide internet shutdown (Al-Shammouri, 2026). Hsu, Myers, and Thompson (2026) observed that through official television networks and a network of affiliated or sympathetic social media accounts, Iran sought to project an image of resilience despite sustained military strikes by the United States and Israel targeting its cities, military bases, and political leadership.



Although several studies have examined propaganda, media framing, misinformation, and digital conflict communication in relation to conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine war and the Israel–Palestine conflict, there remains a paucity of scholarly attention to how social media platforms framed propaganda narratives during the 2026 United States–Israel–Iran conflict. Existing studies have largely focused on traditional media coverage, geopolitical implications, military strategies, or the general role of social media in conflict reporting, with limited attention to the framing patterns, propaganda techniques, and narrative constructions disseminated through platforms such as X and Facebook during the conflict.

Despite the growing influence of social media in shaping public understanding of international conflicts, there is increasing concern about how narratives surrounding the United States–Israel–Iran conflict are selectively framed, manipulated, or distorted online. This raises important questions about the credibility of information, the role of propaganda, and the extent to which audiences are exposed to biased or competing interpretations of the conflict. Against this background, this study examined the framing of propaganda narratives on X and Facebook during the 2026 United States–Israel–Iran conflict.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the dominant frames employed in social media propaganda surrounding the 2026 Israel-US-Iran conflict?
2. What are the key propaganda techniques and narrative strategies used by different actors in shaping social media discourse on the 2026 Israel-US-Iran conflict?
3. How are social media platforms utilised to construct, amplify, and sustain propaganda narratives during the 2026 Israel-US-Iran conflict?
4. What are the implications of social media propaganda framing on the interpretation and understanding of the conflict by Nigerian audiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Social Media, Conflict, Framing, and Propaganda

The term "social media" describes the application of mobile and web-based technology to transform communication into an interactive conversation (Oparaugo, 2025). Social media can take many different forms, such as podcasts, wikis, magazines, online forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, photos, videos, ratings, and social bookmarking. It goes without saying that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Skype, and others are widely utilized for communication in this day and age of social media revolution. Ezema and Ezema (2023, p. 155); Aligwe et al., (2016) opined that social media platforms are in vogue today for different organisations, ministries, financial institutions and associations for interaction, marketing, political meetings and messages through LinkedIn for professionals and Facebook used more by young people.

According to Laursen and Hafen (2010), conflict entails disagreement, which is manifest in incompatible or opposing behaviors or views. Thakore (2013, p.7) defines conflict as a



disagreement between two or more individuals or groups with each individual or group trying to gain acceptance of its view over others. Conflict in its perpetual convocation of misunderstanding between more than one person and the degree of interest involved in a particular cause of action derail the reasoning ability of man to take unequivocal decisions and actions in order to satisfy the pursuing interest either privately or collectively (Kapori & Benarkuu, 2024).

According to Entman (1993, cited in Wu, 2023), framing is journalists' occupation to discover some parts of the problem in reality and make it more outstanding in people's minds to enable their audience to understand the definitions given by a certain medium, to make a worldly interpretation estimation, and to suggest a possible solution. Through processes of presenting, delaying, and repeating certain concepts and ideas, framing reinforces some ideas over others, highlighting certain perspectives while excluding others entirely (Zaklama, 2025; Onwe et al., 2017). The process of selection can be intentional, aiming to persuade the audience towards a specific idea, or it can be unintentional, where the published aspects reflect cultural and professional factors, such as journalistic pressures or communication references, without any intent to conceal specific aspects.

Propaganda is defined as a social control by using words or tools of persuasion and manipulation from "hidden or undefined sources to convince people to act or think in accordance and to uphold or support" the choices and reasoning of another individual (Fitzmaurice, 2018 p. 64). In a similar manner, Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) explain propaganda as the deliberate and "systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (p. 7). Propaganda has been used in many disciplines in the quest to persuade the intended audience (Peprah & Wornyo, 2023).

Conflicts in the Middle East have become a recurring feature in international media coverage, academic literature, and global politics. The region hosts various forms of violence, as well as is surrounded by other long-term conflict zones (Tanios, 2021). Hamdach (2026) notes that the 2026 U.S.–Israel war against Iran has challenged the fundamental realities that have dictated the last few decades of Middle Eastern history. There have been large-scale strikes targeted at Iranian military assets and the Islamic Republic's top leadership, killing Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (CfPA, 2026).

Social Media Framing of the 2026 Israel-US vs. Iran War

Social media platforms have been significantly used in framing narratives of the war between Israel/US versus Iran. Apart from the framing types and directions used, there has also been the use of propaganda by all parties (US, Israel, and Iran) and many social media actors. There are many types of frames, however, we are going to discuss the ones used in social media propaganda for the Israel/US versus Iran war.

Human interest vs conflict vs economic consequence frames

These frames are mostly utilized for media coverage of crisis within the society. This frame is best suited for this study. According to Semetko and Valkenburg (2000 p.95), "the human



interest frame brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem”. This type of news frame has been found to be significantly prominent in television news coverage. Conflict frames are presented in two forms of: discourse use (naming or labeling of events, use of words that imply blame, and explanation about the nature of a situation), and development of the issues (Putnam & Shoemaker, 2007). Economic consequence frame examines the effect of the crisis on the economy. It is often found in in-depth media analysis of a crisis.

The human interest, conflict, and economic consequence frames were adopted in this study. This is because this framing type best describes how the Israel/US versus Iran war has been framed so far on social media. The human interest here involves loss of lives and properties during the conflict; the conflict represent the crisis in the Middle East between Israel/US and Iran; the economic consequence has to do with spending on weapons, rise in commodities such as petroleum products, etc., as a result of the war.

However, the framing on the Israel/US versus Iran has taken distance framing direction.

Distance suffering framing

Distance framing as defined by Robinson is a type of news framing that “creates emotional distance between the audience and people suffering in a conflict”. The news of the Israel/US versus Iran conflict is presented in a manner that does not strike an immediate emotional connection or empathy for the victims in the minds of media audiences. Distance framing is also referred to as neutral framing. The media does not take a position.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Alsharairi, Al-Souob, Al-Qadi and Shatnawi (2025) conducted a study on “Social Media Communication and Framing of the Gaza Conflict: Impact on Public Opinion”. The study utilised media framing and connective action theories, and highlighted how digital platforms serve as vital arenas where users selectively influence public sentiment and political identity. The findings reveal that online conversations predominantly center on humanitarian and moral matters; however, posts that evoke strong emotions are seen as both authentic and politically charged.

Kofoworola (2026) investigated “Media Framing and the Construction of Conflict Narratives in the Digital Age”. Based on Framing Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory, the paper explained that Nigeria media serve as a double-edged sword as they are both war mongers and peace makers. Sensible reports and factual information reduce conflicts and tension arising from fake news and disinformation. It concludes that media literacy, professional ethics and regulation are the solutions to the problems that will make the media serve as peace makers in conflict and national unity in Nigeria.

Asmus (2024) studied “Framing of Conflict Reporting in the Israel-Hamas Conflict in German Online Newspaper Articles.” Utilizing Framing analysis methodologies by Robert M. Entman, Claes H. de Vreese and Paul D’Angelo, this research delves into frames, framing and framing



devices. The findings of the chosen samples highlight a pro-Israel bias, with Israeli actions framed as justified self-defense and Palestinian perspectives often marginalized. This study contributes to the broader discourse on media reporting of the Israel-Palestine conflict, offering timely insights into the impact of media coverage on public perception during the ongoing Israel-Hamas escalations.

Rizk (2026) examined “Social Media and Public Opinion in Times of Conflict: How Arab Social Media Impacted International Perspectives on the Gaza War”. The research is conducted through semi-structured interviews with 19 participants: 4 Arab social media content creators and 15 English-speaking university students (13 American citizens and 2 international students studying in American universities). Through these semi-structured qualitative interviews, the research investigates the agenda-setting capabilities of social media during conflicts and identifies effective cross-cultural communication strategies. The study employed purposive sampling with snowball technique, targeting content creators with established social media presence and university students who use English as their primary language. While the findings provide insights into cross-cultural digital communication during conflicts, the study acknowledges limitations in sample size and generalizability.

Park and Oliullah (2025) conducted a study on “Framing Conflict: American Media’s Framing of the Israel-Hamas War”. A content analysis of 335 news articles from The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, and Fox News published between October 2023 and March 2024 reveals that Fox News predominantly employs the ‘security threat’ frame, portraying Israel’s actions as necessary defenses, while The New York Times and CNN emphasize ‘humanitarian crisis’ and ‘moral responsibility’ frames, highlighting impacts on Palestinian civilians and ethical concerns. The Washington Post takes a more balanced but critical approach toward the war. The outcomes demonstrate that in the coverage of an international conflict media framing may take a bidirectional nature, where media influence public opinion while simultaneously adapting to audience perceptions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing theory, first conceptualized by Goffman (1974) as a sociological construct and later adapted to communication studies by Entman (1993), posits that the way information is presented— or “framed”—shapes how audiences perceive and interpret reality. According to Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma (2022), framing a communication text or message involves highlighting specific aspects of perceived reality and making them more noticeable in a way that supports particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, or recommendations for action. This suggests that the way information is packaged and presented significantly shapes how audiences perceive, receive, and interpret it. Littlejohn and Foss (2008) further describe framing as a second level of agenda setting. While agenda setting tells the public what to think about, framing goes a step further by suggesting how they should think about an issue.

A central assumption of framing theory is that a single issue can be presented in a variety of ways, each carrying different implications, values, and considerations. As Chong and Druckman



(2007) note, framing refers to the process through which individuals organise their understanding of a problem or reorient their evaluation of it. According to Okoye and Oparaugo (2019, p. 53) the media may shape opinion by framing events and issues in particular ways. Framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue.

In traditional media, framing is largely controlled by journalists and editors, who act as gatekeepers, selecting the aspects of a story to emphasize (Scheufele, 1999). However, the advent of digital media has fundamentally altered this dynamic by introducing a participatory, multi-directional communication environment in which users, algorithms, and influencers co-construct narratives (Cacciatore et al., 2016). The digital media age, characterized by platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok as well as the proliferation of online news and blogs, has expanded the scope of framing theory to include new actors, technologies, and challenges such as misinformation and algorithmic bias (Almakaty, 2025).

This theory, therefore, is operationalized in this study as it shows how social media platforms frame the conflict between Israel/US versus Iran with the use of various propaganda techniques.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers adopted both the descriptive survey research method and the content analysis research method. For the survey aspect, a structured questionnaire was used to obtain responses from the respondents and this provided efficient and uniform responses. For the content analysis, the researcher used coding sheet and coding guide in collecting the data. The researcher adopted both qualitative and quantitative aspects of content analysis to analyse the variables. The population of this study was drawn from social media posts specifically on stories that have to do with the Israel/US versus Iran conflict from February 28 to March 31, 2026. Two hundred and fifty-seven (257) stories on the Israel/US versus Iran conflict on both X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. Since the population size is small and manageable, same figure was used as the sample size.

For the survey aspect, the population of the study was 1,185,169, which is the population of Enugu urban in 2026. From the population, a sample of 400 was determined using the Australian Calculator. To ensure validity and reliability, the study employed triangulation by combining survey and content analysis methods, while the research instruments and coding categories were subjected to expert validation and pilot testing. In addition, inter-coder reliability was conducted for the content analysis, and consistent coding procedures were maintained to ensure accuracy and dependability of findings.



DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1: Dominant Frames in Social Media Propaganda

RQ1: What are the dominant frames employed in social media propaganda surrounding the Israel-US vs. Iran conflict?

Type of Frame	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gains vs. Loss Frames	0	0%
Episodic vs. Thematic Frames	0	0%
Strategy vs. Issues Frames	0	0%
Human Interest vs. Conflict vs. Economic Consequences Frames	257	100%
Total	257	100%

Source: Content Analysis, 2026.

The table above shows that the dominant frames employed in social media propaganda surrounding the Israel-US vs. Iran conflict, is the Human Interest vs. Conflict vs. Economic Consequences frames.

Table 2: Propaganda Techniques and Narrative Strategies

RQ2: What are the key propaganda techniques and narrative strategies used by different actors in shaping social media discourse on the conflict?

Propaganda Technique	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Name Calling	52	20.2%
Card stacking	51	19.8%
Bandwagon	0	0%
Transfer Technique	20	7.8%
Fear Appeal	32	12.5%
Plain Folk Technique	0	0%
Testimonials	0	0%
Glittering Generalities	23	8.9%
Misinformation and Disinformation	79	30.7%
Total	257	100%

Source: Content Analysis, 2026.

The table above shows that there are quite a number of the propaganda techniques and narrative strategies used by different actors in shaping social media discourse on the conflict. However, misinformation and disinformation appear to have been used the most.



Table 3: Utilization of Social Media Platforms

RQ3: How are social media platforms utilized to construct, amplify, and sustain propaganda narratives during the conflict?

S/N	Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
1.	Social media platforms were used to spread selective information that supports specific sides of the conflict	180 (45.9%)	130 (33.2%)	40 (10.2%)	25 (6.4%)	17 (4.3%)	392
2.	Influencers and opinion leaders played a role in amplifying propaganda messages online	150 (38.3%)	140 (35.7%)	45 (11.5%)	32 (8.2%)	25 (6.4%)	392
3.	Repeated sharing (reposts, comments, likes) helped to sustain propaganda narratives	170 (43.4%)	145 (37%)	30 (7.7%)	25 (6.4%)	22 (5.6%)	392
4.	Emotional content (images, videos) was used to strengthen propaganda messages on social media	165 (42.1%)	140 (35.7%)	35 (8.9%)	30 (7.7%)	22 (5.6%)	392
5.	Social media algorithms promoted content that align with users' existing belief	155 (39.5%)	135 (34.4%)	45 (11.5%)	32 (8.2%)	25 (6.4%)	392
6.	Hashtags and trends were used to coordinate and spread propaganda narratives	160 (40.8%)	140 (35.7%)	38 (9.7%)	30 (7.7%)	24 (6.1%)	392

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The analysis of the table shows that a majority of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that social media platforms are actively utilized to construct, amplify, and sustain propaganda narratives through selective information, influencer engagement, repeated sharing, emotional content, algorithms, and coordinated trends.



Table 4: Implications of Social Media Propaganda Framing

RQ4: What are the implications of social media propaganda framing on the interpretation and understanding of the conflict by audiences?

S/N	Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
7.	Social media propaganda influences how I perceive the causes of the conflict	170 (43.3%)	135 (34.4%)	40 (10.2%)	25 (6.4%)	22 (5.6%)	392
8.	Exposure to social media contents affects my opinion about which side is right or wrong	160 (40.8%)	140 (35.7%)	38 (9.7%)	30 (7.7%)	24 (6.1%)	392
9.	Propaganda on social media can make the conflict appear more extreme than it actually is	175 (44.6%)	135 (34.4%)	35 (8.9%)	25 (6.4%)	22 (5.6%)	392
10.	Social media framing can create bias in how audiences interpret the conflict	180 (45.9%)	130 (33.2%)	35 (8.9%)	25 (6.4%)	22 (5.6%)	392
11.	Continuous exposure to conflict-related content shapes my understanding of the situation	165 (42.11%)	140 (35.7%)	35 (8.9%)	30 (7.7%)	22 (5.6%)	392
12.	Social media propaganda can mislead audiences about the reality of the conflict	175 (44.6%)	135 (34.4%)	30 (7.7%)	30 (7.7%)	22 (5.6%)	392

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The table indicates that most respondents strongly agree and agree that social media propaganda framing significantly influences audience perception, shapes opinions, introduces bias, exaggerates conflict realities, and can mislead public understanding.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that X and Facebook significantly shaped propaganda narratives during the US-Israel-Iran conflict through emotionally-driven framing, misinformation, and repeated digital implication. The study revealed that human interest, conflict, and economic consequence frames dominated social media discourse, suggesting that online narratives were constructed to evoke emotional reactions and sustain audience engagement. This finding agrees with Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) who argued that human interest framing introduces emotional dimensions capable of influencing audience interpretation of events. Similarly, the result aligns with Alsharairi et al (2025), whose study found that emotionally charged social media contents shaped public sentiment and political identity during the Gaza conflict.



The study further established that misinformation and disinformation were the most prevalent propaganda techniques used by various actors in shaping online discourse. This corroborates the position of Kofoworola (2026), who observed that digital media can intensify conflict through fake news and manipulative narratives. However, unlike previous studies that focused largely on traditional media framing or general conflict communication, this study extends knowledge by comparatively examining how X and Facebook specifically facilitated propaganda circulation through algorithms, influencer participation, hashtags, reposts, and emotional multimedia contents. The findings suggest that the interactive and algorithmic nature of social media contributes to the rapid reinforcement of ideological narratives and biased interpretations of international conflicts. In the words of Zaklama (2025), through processes of presenting, delaying, and repeating certain concepts and ideas, framing reinforces some ideas over others, highlighting certain perspectives while excluding others entirely.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study is that human Interest vs. conflict vs. economic consequences were the dominant frames employed in social media propaganda surrounding the Israel-US vs. Iran conflict. Misinformation and disinformation were the key propaganda techniques and narrative strategies used by different actors in shaping social media discourse on the conflict. Facebook and X platforms were utilised to construct, amplify, and sustain propaganda narratives during the conflict, such as being used to spread selective information that supports specific sides of the conflict. There are implications of social media propaganda framing on the interpretation and understanding of the conflict by audiences, which includes creating bias in how audiences interpret the conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the completion of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Media practitioners and researchers should prioritise balanced reporting by integrating issue-based and thematic frames alongside human interest and conflict frames to reduce excessive emotional bias in social media coverage of the conflict.
2. Regulatory bodies and media organisations should strengthen fact-checking mechanisms and digital literacy campaigns to curb the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and other manipulative propaganda techniques.
3. Owners of social media platforms should enhance transparency in their algorithms and regulate the activities of influencers and coordinated campaigns to limit the amplification and spread of propaganda narratives.
4. Educational institutions and communication stakeholders should promote media literacy programmes that equip audiences with critical skills to recognize bias, evaluate information sources, and interpret conflict-related content more objectively.



Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge all the authors whose works were cited and referenced in this work.

Sources of funding

The study was not funded.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions.

Dr. Anigbo conceived the study and wrote the introduction, statement of problem and research questions. Nonye Eze wrote the Theoretical Framework, Empirical Review, and Conceptual review, while Oparaugo wrote the Methodology, Data Analysis, Discussion of Findings, Conclusion, Recommendations, References and Abstract, as well as the corrections. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Data availability statement.

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

Citation

Anigbo, R. U., Oparaugo, B., & Eze, N. J. (2026). Framing propaganda narratives on X and Facebook during the 2026 United States- Israel-Iran conflict. *International Journal of Sub-Saharan African Research*, 4(2), 172-186



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