

## Internet Memes and the Framing of the Gaza War: Perspectives from Media Narratives

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### Abstract

*The increasing prominence of social media has transformed the production, circulation, and consumption of information during armed conflicts, with internet memes emerging as influential tools of digital communication and political expression. This study examines how internet memes framed the Gaza War across international digital spaces and explores the dominant narratives embedded within these visual and textual artifacts. Grounded in Framing Theory, the paper investigates the ways in which memes construct, reinforce, and contest interpretations of the conflict among global online audiences. The study adopts a qualitative comparative research design and relies on secondary data drawn from existing scholarly literature, reports, digital archives, and publicly available meme collections circulated on major social media platforms, including X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit during key periods of the conflict. Through thematic and frame analysis, the study identifies recurring frames such as humanitarian crisis, resistance and liberation, victimhood, geopolitical contestation, media bias, and international solidarity. The findings reveal significant variations in meme narratives across different geopolitical and cultural contexts, reflecting divergent ideological positions and media environments. While some memes foreground civilian suffering and humanitarian concerns, others emphasize national security, political resistance, or criticism of international actors and mainstream media institutions. The study further demonstrates that memes function not merely as humorous content but as powerful communicative devices that simplify complex geopolitical issues, facilitate transnational engagement, and shape public perceptions of conflict. The research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital media, conflict communication, and participatory political discourse by highlighting the role of user-generated visual content in the framing of contemporary wars. It concludes that internet memes have become significant alternative mechanisms for international conflict coverage, influencing how audiences interpret events beyond traditional news media frameworks. The study recommends greater scholarly attention to meme culture as an emerging force in global political communication and digital conflict reporting.*

### Keywords

Internet memes; Gaza War; Framing Theory; digital narratives; social media; conflict communication; international coverage; political communication.



## I. Introduction

The emergence of digital communication technologies has profoundly transformed the global media landscape, fundamentally altering how information is produced, disseminated, consumed, and contested. Over the past two decades, social media platforms have evolved from simple networking sites into influential communication ecosystems that shape public discourse on political, social, economic, and cultural issues. These platforms have become

particularly significant during periods of conflict, crisis, and political instability, where they serve not only as channels for information dissemination but also as arenas for public debate, advocacy, resistance, and meaning-making. Unlike traditional media systems that rely on professional gatekeepers such as editors, journalists, and media organizations to filter and disseminate information, social media facilitate decentralized communication, enabling ordinary citizens, activists, organizations, and political actors to participate directly in the creation and circulation of narratives (Solo-Anaeto et al., 2026). Consequently, contemporary conflicts are increasingly fought not only on physical battlefields but also within digital spaces where competing interpretations, ideologies, and representations struggle for visibility and legitimacy.

The growing importance of social media in conflict communication has generated significant scholarly interest in understanding how digital platforms influence public perceptions of war and humanitarian crises. Researchers have noted that digital media have reconfigured the dynamics of information warfare by enabling real-time communication, transnational engagement, and widespread dissemination of user-generated content. Through platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube, individuals can access diverse perspectives on conflicts, often bypassing traditional news organizations altogether. These developments have created new opportunities for political participation and civic engagement while simultaneously raising concerns regarding misinformation, propaganda, selective representation, and ideological polarization. Within this rapidly evolving communication environment, internet memes have emerged as one of the most influential and widely circulated forms of digital expression (Antonakaki & Ioannidis, 2025).

Internet memes represent a distinctive form of communication that combines visual imagery, text, symbolism, humor, satire, and cultural references to convey ideas, opinions, and emotions. Originally conceptualized by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 as cultural units that spread and replicate through imitation, memes have acquired new significance in the digital age. Contemporary internet memes are highly adaptable communicative artifacts that can be rapidly created, modified, and disseminated across online networks. Their popularity stems from their ability to communicate complex ideas in a concise, visually engaging, and emotionally resonant manner (Antonakaki & Ioannidis, 2025). Unlike lengthy news reports or academic analyses, memes condense information into simplified yet powerful messages that are easily understood and shared by audiences across different cultural and linguistic contexts.

The communicative power of memes extends far beyond entertainment. While memes are often associated with humor and online culture, scholars increasingly recognize them as important instruments of political communication and public discourse. Internet memes are frequently employed to comment on political events, criticize institutions, mobilize support for social causes, challenge dominant narratives, and influence public opinion. Their participatory nature allows users to become active producers rather than passive consumers of information, facilitating the emergence of networked forms of political engagement (Rodley, 2016). As a result, memes have become central to contemporary digital activism, election campaigns, protest movements, and international political debates. Their capacity to simplify complex issues, evoke emotional responses, and encourage viral dissemination has transformed them into powerful tools for framing public understanding of political realities.

The relevance of memes becomes particularly evident during armed conflicts, where competing actors seek to influence public perceptions through strategic communication. Wars are not merely military confrontations; they are also struggles over narratives, legitimacy, and public support. Throughout history, governments, political organizations, media institutions, and advocacy groups have attempted to shape public understanding of conflicts through various forms of communication. In the digital era, however, these efforts increasingly occur within decentralized online environments characterized by participatory communication and user-generated content (Alam & Farida, 2025). Memes have emerged as significant components of these environments because they provide accessible and highly shareable mechanisms for interpreting and communicating complex geopolitical events. Through visual symbolism, emotional appeals, and rhetorical framing, memes can influence how audiences perceive victims, perpetrators, causes, consequences, and potential solutions to conflicts.

One of the most prominent examples of digitally mediated conflict communication in recent years is the Gaza War. The conflict has attracted extensive international attention and generated intense debates across traditional and digital media platforms. As a protracted and deeply contested geopolitical issue, the Gaza conflict has long been characterized by competing narratives concerning occupation, resistance, security, sovereignty, human rights, and international law. Different actors—including governments, journalists, advocacy organizations, humanitarian agencies, political movements, and ordinary citizens have sought to advance particular interpretations of events and influence public opinion regarding the conflict. Consequently, the Gaza War provides an important context for examining how digital communication shapes contemporary understandings of armed conflict (Ademosu et al., 2025).

The international visibility of the Gaza War has been amplified significantly by social media platforms, which have enabled users worldwide to participate in discussions surrounding the conflict. Images, videos, eyewitness accounts, news reports, commentaries, and memes have circulated rapidly across digital networks, creating a highly dynamic information environment. Within this environment, internet memes have become prominent vehicles for expressing political positions, humanitarian concerns, ideological perspectives, and emotional reactions. Some memes portray Palestinians primarily as victims of humanitarian suffering and displacement, emphasizing civilian casualties, destruction of infrastructure, and violations of human rights. Others frame the conflict through narratives of resistance, liberation, and anti-colonial struggle, highlighting historical grievances and political aspirations (Aondover & Ademosu, 2025). Conversely, certain memes emphasize issues of national security, terrorism, self-defense, and state sovereignty, reflecting perspectives that prioritize Israeli security concerns. Additional memes critique mainstream media coverage, international organizations, foreign governments, or geopolitical power structures, thereby introducing alternative interpretations of the conflict into public discourse.

The proliferation of Gaza-related memes illustrates how digital communication increasingly shapes public understandings of international conflicts. Unlike traditional news coverage, which is constrained by professional norms, editorial policies, and institutional structures, memes offer a flexible and participatory mode of communication that allows users to interpret and represent events according to their own perspectives. Through processes of adaptation, remixing, and recirculation, memes continuously evolve as they move across digital networks, enabling the emergence of diverse and often competing narratives. These narratives can influence how audiences assign blame, identify victims, evaluate political actors, and understand the broader significance of the conflict. Consequently, analyzing internet memes provides valuable insights into the ways contemporary conflicts are framed and interpreted within digital public spheres.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

The influence of digital media in shaping public discourse has grown exponentially in recent years, especially during global crises and armed conflicts. As traditional media loses its monopoly on information dissemination, social media platforms have emerged as critical tools for both communication and advocacy. Within this digital ecosystem, internet memes — once considered trivial or purely humorous have become powerful vehicles for expressing political views, spreading awareness, and mobilizing support across international borders (Aondover & Ademosu, 2025).

In the context of the ongoing war in Gaza, internet memes have been widely used to convey messages about oppression, resistance, state violence, and humanitarian crises. These memes, often shared virally, help simplify complex geopolitical issues and make them accessible to a broad, global audience. They allow individuals, including those without institutional power or access to formal media channels, to participate in shaping public opinion and international narratives about the conflict.

However, this trend raises important concerns. While memes can raise awareness and generate empathy, they also risk oversimplifying complex issues, spreading misinformation, and reinforcing existing biases. Many memes lack factual grounding or context, and their emotional appeal can sometimes promote polarization rather than informed debate (Aondover & Obasi, 2023). Additionally, there is limited academic research on the actual impact of memes in shaping international perspectives on conflicts such as the one in Gaza.

The problem, therefore, lies in understanding whether internet memes are effective tools for international awareness and advocacy or whether they contribute to digital noise and misrepresentation. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of internet memes in the coverage of the Gaza war, focusing on their content, reach, and impact on global public perception.

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

Framing theory (Entman, 1993) emphasizes how media frames shape the interpretation of events by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality. Memes act as framing devices by presenting the Gaza conflict through humor, irony, or satire, thereby reinterpreting events. For example, memes framing Palestinian resilience often counter dominant portrayals of Palestinians as passive victims. By reframing narratives, memes challenge traditional power structures in international coverage (Aondover et al., 2025).

The concept of framing is particularly useful for understanding the communicative role of memes in conflict situations. Framing refers to the process through which certain aspects of reality are selected, emphasized, and presented in ways that encourage particular interpretations. Frames serve as organizing principles that structure meaning, guide audience attention, and shape perceptions of social and political issues. According to framing scholars, communicators influence audience understanding by highlighting specific elements of an issue while simultaneously excluding or downplaying others. In conflict reporting, framing plays a critical role because it affects how audiences perceive causes, consequences, responsibilities, and solutions. Different frames can lead audiences to interpret the same event in markedly different ways depending on which aspects are emphasized.

This paper draws upon Framing Theory as its primary theoretical framework. Rooted in the pioneering work of sociologist Erving Goffman and subsequently developed by communication scholars such as Robert Entman, Framing Theory provides a robust analytical lens for examining how messages shape audience perceptions. Entman argues that framing involves selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient within a communicative text in order to promote particular definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. In the context of internet memes, framing

occurs through the strategic combination of images, captions, symbols, metaphors, humor, and cultural references. These elements work together to construct specific interpretations of political events and guide audience responses (Obasi & Msughter, 2023).

Applying Framing Theory to the paper of internet memes is particularly relevant because memes are inherently selective representations of reality. Every meme highlights certain aspects of an issue while omitting others, thereby encouraging audiences to view events through particular interpretive lenses. For example, a meme focusing on civilian casualties may frame the Gaza War primarily as a humanitarian crisis, whereas a meme emphasizing militant attacks may frame the conflict as a security issue. Similarly, memes criticizing international media coverage may frame the conflict in terms of information politics and media bias. By identifying and analyzing these frames, researchers can better understand how digital narratives influence public perceptions of conflict and contribute to broader political debates.

## II. Review of Literature

The concept of internet memes has become central to understanding digital communication and participatory culture in the 21st century. The term meme was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, where he used it to describe a unit of cultural transmission—similar to a gene that spreads from person to person within a society. According to Dawkins, memes could be ideas, symbols, styles, or practices that replicate and evolve as they are shared. With the rise of the internet and social media, the meaning of the term has evolved significantly, now referring primarily to humorous, symbolic, or satirical content that spreads virally online.

Internet memes are a form of digital content typically a combination of image and text—that is replicated and adapted by users across online platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, and TikTok. They often rely on cultural references, humor, irony, or sarcasm to communicate a message quickly and memorably. Unlike traditional media content, memes are created and distributed not by professionals, but by everyday users, making them a grassroots form of media production (Azeema et al., 2026).

A defining feature of internet memes is their intertextuality they often draw meaning from shared cultural knowledge or past media content, making them understandable to those familiar with the context. This makes memes an effective vehicle for community expression, political commentary, and social critique (Aondover & Obasi, 2023). As Limor Shifman (2014) puts it, memes are “groups of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users.” This definition highlights both the collaborative and transformative nature of meme culture.

Internet memes are powerful due to their speed, emotional appeal, and participatory design. They spread rapidly across networks, often going viral in minutes or hours, especially during times of crisis, controversy, or heightened public attention. They can be humorous, satirical, inspirational, or even educational but in political or humanitarian contexts, they often take on serious roles as tools of resistance, advocacy, and digital activism (Mohammed & Aondover, 2025).

Memes have become particularly influential in times of armed conflict and political upheaval, where traditional media may be biased, censored, or too slow to respond. In such situations, internet users—especially young people and activists turn to memes to express

frustration, mobilize support, criticize institutions, or expose injustices. The Arab Spring, #BlackLivesMatter, EndSARS, and the ongoing war in Gaza are all examples of events where memes have played critical roles in shaping public narratives and international attention.

However, memes also present challenges. Because they often oversimplify complex issues, they risk spreading misinformation, reinforcing stereotypes, or deepening polarization. Their humor and brevity, while powerful in capturing attention, can sometimes undermine serious topics or distort the truth. Additionally, the virality of memes makes them difficult to regulate, and they can be used maliciously to spread propaganda, fake news, or hate speech.

The algorithms of social media platforms also play a significant role in meme distribution. Content that generates strong emotional reactions, especially outrage, humor, or empathy—is more likely to be promoted by these algorithms, regardless of accuracy or social value. This incentivizes the creation of emotionally charged memes, even when the content lacks context.

Despite these limitations, the cultural and communicative significance of internet memes continues to grow. In modern digital society, memes are not just entertainment—they are a form of digital vernacular that reflects the values, frustrations, and beliefs of online communities. They are used to comment on politics, social justice, celebrity culture, and global crises, acting as a mirror to contemporary public sentiment.

In academic contexts, memes are now recognized as worthy of study across fields such as media studies, communication, sociology, political science, and cultural studies. Researchers analyze memes not just as artifacts of internet culture, but as indicators of how people make sense of the world, especially when traditional information systems break down or fail to represent marginalized voices (Maradun & Aondover, 2025). Internet memes represent a new form of mass communication fast, emotional, user-generated, and globally accessible. They are capable of carrying complex social and political messages in a simplified yet powerful format, and they play a critical role in shaping online discourse. In the case of international conflict, such as the war in Gaza, memes have become both symbolic tools of solidarity and contested spaces for ideological struggle. Understanding the concept of internet memes, therefore, is essential to analyzing how digital media influences public perception and global narratives in the 21st century.

### **2.1 Media Coverage on the Gaza War**

The Gaza War has been extensively covered by media outlets around the world. This coverage has been diverse, spanning from traditional news outlets to social media platforms, and comprises a wide variety of perspectives and narratives. During the conflict, Israel imposed strict controls on international journalists, requiring military escorts and pre-broadcast reviews of their footage. In January 2024, the Supreme Court of Israel upheld these requirements on security grounds. Prominent U.S. media organizations like NBC and CNN confirmed that Israel had the authority to approve content from Gaza, with journalists embedded with the Israeli military required to submit materials for review.

Social media has played a significant role in sharing information, with platforms like TikTok seeing billions of views on related content (Aondover, 2024). Research showed a vast disparity in the number of pro-Palestinian versus pro-Israeli posts. The conflict has led to the spread of misleading information and propaganda. Hamas has been banned from most social media platforms, although content from the group still circulates on sites like Telegram. In Gaza, local content creators documented their experiences, gaining significant followings.

Bollici et al. (2025) observed that in Israel, social media has been used to garner support for military actions, with the government running ads portraying Hamas negatively. Some Israeli influencers and content creators have mocked and dehumanized Palestinians,

leading to widespread criticism. Videos posted by Israeli soldiers showing abuse and destruction in Gaza have gone viral, prompting international condemnation and internal investigations by the Israel Defence Forces. The war has had a severe impact on Gaza's infrastructure and economy, with extensive damage to homes, hospitals, schools, and essential services. The conflict has caused significant job losses and economic decline in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. International scrutiny and media coverage have highlighted the human toll and the challenges faced by journalists operating in the region.

### **III. Result and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Coverage by Type**

##### **a. Social media**

Social Media has played a major part in sharing information about the conflict, especially platforms like TikTok, where war-related videos have garnered billions of views. As of 10 October 2023, the hashtag #Palestine has some 27.8 billion views, and the hashtag #Israel has 23 billion on TikTok. Similar statistics were seen in later analysis with research done by the company Humanz, a tech company founded by former IDF intelligence officers. Humanz showed that during October 2023, there were 7.39 billion posts with pro-Israeli tags posted to Instagram and TikTok, while there were 109.61 billion posts with pro-Palestinian tags published on the sites in the same time. The documentation and spreading of information about the conflict is not a new phenomenon, with multiple clips showing the continued conflict going viral since the app was first made public (Zidani, 2021).

However, this has also resulted in the dissemination of misleading information and propaganda. In mid-October, the Communications and Digital Minister Fahmi Fadzil confirmed that the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) would meet with TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, following complaints from Malaysian TikTok users that content containing words like Hamas was removed by the social media company.

##### **b. Hamas in Palestine**

In the hours after the attack, Hamas "employed a broad, sophisticated media strategy" using bot accounts to spread graphic, emotionally charged, and false propaganda that was picked up and repeated by official accounts and foreign governments. Cyabra, an Israeli social media intelligence company, found that on the day after the attack, one in four posts about the conflict on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X were from fake accounts. The New York Times described the start of the Gaza war as releasing a "deluge of online propaganda and disinformation" that was "larger than anything seen before". It described the conflict as "fast becoming a world war online" and stated that Russia, China, Iran, and its proxies had used state media and covert influence campaigns on social media networks to support Hamas, undermine Israel, criticize the United States, and cause unrest. James Rubin of the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Centre called coverage of the conflict " swept up in an undeclared information war with authoritarian countries.

Hamas has been barred from most social media sites and is unable to post on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok; however, some content from the group has been posted on other sites, such as Telegram, where an account reportedly aligned to Hamas would post photos and videos in support of Hamas or documenting their actions, per the Atlantic Council. Following the attack, Hamas used bot accounts originating in countries such as Pakistan to sidestep bans on Facebook and X (Jaber, 2026).

In Gaza, young content creators, such as Hind Khoudary, Plestia Alaqad, Motaz Azaiza, and Bisan Owda, documented their lives through the war, gaining significant

followings on social media. In Yemen, teenage influencer Rashid, nicknamed "Timhouthi Chalamet", went viral on TikTok and X after posting a video of himself touring the captured ship *Galaxy Leader* and was later interviewed by streamer Hasan Piker. An image of a teenage boy holding onto his deceased mother in Gaza went viral on social media in February 2024. In June 2024, a former Meta employee sued the company for wrongful termination, stating it was suppressing Palestinian content. In July 2024, a Meta spokesperson stated that an interview with Jeremy Scahill on Democracy Now! had been erroneously removed and was restored.

In March 2025, Israel raised claims that Gaza-based blogger Salah al-Ja'frawi, who is reportedly known as "Hammas' social media star" raised funds for Hamas and the rebuilding of Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis before pocketing the donations totaling about \$4 million. The Palestinian Health Ministry issued a statement that denied any involvement with the fundraising via social media, and the ministry and Palestinian activist Mustafa Asfour condemned the actions (Arisha et al., 2025).

### c. In Israel

In January 2024, The Intercept reported that Israeli tech volunteers in the group Iron Truth used their connections with those in Big Tech, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X, to censor information from social media they deemed to be harmful to Israeli interests. The project was launched on October 7 by Dani Kaganovitch, a Tel Aviv-based software engineer at Google. A bot on Telegram was created to forward all flagged content to "sympathetic insiders" at Big Tech companies who would then act to remove it. The Intercept reported that "So far, nearly 2,000 participants have flagged a wide variety of posts for removal, from content that's racist or false to posts that are merely critical of Israel or sympathetic to Palestinians, according to chat logs reviewed by The Intercept." Emerson Brooking, a fellow with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, told The Intercept: "They're not trying to ensure an open, secure, accessible online space for all, free from disinformation. They're trying to target and remove information and disinformation that they see as harmful or dangerous to Israelis." Kaganovitch said the project also has allies outside Israel's Silicon Valley. The group's organizers met with the director of a controversial Israeli government cyber unit, and its core team of more than 50 volunteers and 10 programmers includes a former member of the Israeli Parliament (Nnorom et al., 2026).

Videos of the attacks against Israel and its citizens were reportedly spread through a paid partnership with the Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry, and are a part of the Israeli government's sweeping social media campaign to build support for its military actions. Reportedly, in the week following the October attacks by Hamas, Israel's Foreign Affairs Ministry had run about 30 ads that were seen over 4 million times on X, which portrayed Hamas as a "vicious terrorist group" similar to ISIS.

Israeli travel blogger and social influencer Ella Kenan pivoted her content shortly after the 7 October attacks and began to push the hashtag 'HamasIsISIS' through her 200,000 followers. She also created a poster stating 'Greta Thunberg Supports ISIS' after Thunberg posted a picture of herself and friends at a rally for Gaza. The poster spread across multiple social networks (Fahmy et al., 2026).

In early November 2023, a satirical video created by Israeli actress Noa Tishby was criticized for being Islamophobic and Queer-Phobic after it went viral. The video was captioned as showing "...pro-Hamas college students on their journey to normalizing a massacre", adding that "a huge part of our Jewish culture is using humor to deal with trauma." In the video, the actors stated that "everyone is welcome, LGBTQH..." with the H to stand for Hamas and held a fake interview with a freedom fighter in Gaza, while wearing outfits that were "oppression chic."

In December 2023, it was reported that a Telegram channel with, at the time, about 10,500 members was created and run by the IDF's Influencing Department. The channel was originally titled "The Avengers" but was soon changed to Azazel, to sound closer to the Hebrew pronunciation for Gaza and another word for hell, and had posted over 700 photos and videos. Many of the videos showed the destruction of Gaza and mocked it or degraded Palestinians, such as images where two Palestinian men were dressed as pigs and captioned claiming they were roaches and products of incest.

#### **d. Trends**

Social media platforms saw trends spreading misinformation and mocking the conflict, and dehumanizing Palestinians. An Israeli special effects and makeup artist drew ire and contempt from other users after posting a video of her pretending to be a Palestinian mother pleading for help before calling cut. Another part of the video shows her applying bruises with makeup, with many calling out the insensitivity it showed. Other videos reportedly created and posted by Israeli citizens showed them mocking different aspects of the suffering of those in Palestine, with some wearing traditional dress and using makeup and talcum powder to appear to be suffering from the bombs, while others flaunt water and electricity while Palestinians have been cut off from those services.

Shortly after the September 2024 electronic device attacks in Lebanon, which caused the deaths of Hezbollah members, civilians, and children, many Israeli and pro-Israel content creators began a trend mocking the explosions. Many, such as Israeli internet personality Noya Cohen, dressed in Muslin headscarves and keffiyehs and picked up phones which then mock exploded in their hands. Others, such as pro-Israeli commentators like Michael Rapaport, made comments and laughed at the explosion and resulting casualties (Elhosary et al., 2026).

IDF

The official IDF channel for informing international media is the International Media Branch of the IDF Spokesperson's Unit, which also runs social media accounts. Lt. Col. Richard Hecht became head of the IMB in 2019, but his predecessor, Peter Lerner, who had retired from the IDF, came out of retirement to join the unit again after the Hamas attack. Jonathan Conricus also held interviews with foreign media. The IDF has a profile on TikTok, which had 1.7 million followers in 2021. Since the outbreak of the war, some IDF soldiers have independently gone viral and amassed large followings on social media. While some were viral videos, others created channels to document the daily life of soldiers during the war.

Videos posted by Israeli soldiers mocking, denigrating, and abusing Palestinians went viral; some of the most violent were used by South Africa at its ICJ case. In a video posted in Gaza in late January 2024, an Israeli soldier posed smiling as an entire neighborhood was blown up by the IDF. In another case, an Israeli soldier coerced and blindfolded Palestinian detainees to pledge themselves as slaves. Widely circulated video and images from around 7 December 2023 showed dozens of Palestinian men in Northern Gaza blindfolded, stripped partially naked, and kneeling on the ground, guarded by Israeli soldiers. Other videos have shown IDF troops since the start of the conflict, purposefully destroying businesses while laughing, setting goods on fire while still in a vehicle, and going through private Gazan citizens' belongings. These videos and actions were condemned by IDF officials after being questioned about the members' actions (Amer, 2025).

In February 2024, an image went viral showing an IDF soldier standing over an injured Palestinian man stripped naked and strapped to a chair. The U.S. Department of State responded to the viral photo, stating it was "deeply troubled". The image was included in a BBC News Verify investigation along with several hundred other videos posted by IDF

soldiers who had made no effort to conceal their identities. IDF officials initially stated that they had terminated the service of one soldier engaging in a potential breach of international law and identified by the BBC. However, they have now included the agreement that it will continue to act to identify unusual cases that potentially show misconduct. Other videos in the review include hundreds of detainees, with most stripped to their underwear, blindfolded, and kneeling in front of the Israeli flag, while watched by IDF members, and interspersed with soldiers posing with guns.

Some of the videos posted appear to show IDF members pushing for the Israeli resettlement of Gaza, after illegal Israeli settlements had been evacuated in 2005. An IDF Rabbi Capt. Avihai Friedman was recorded telling a group of IDF soldiers that "It's our country, all of it — Gaza too.....The whole promised land", while other soldiers expressed their support. In October 2024, an investigation into the social media posts of soldiers in Israel's 749 Combat Engineering Battalion found that their mission was "nothing less than a systematic, concerted, and deliberate effort" to erase the future of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, according to independent outlet Drop Site News.

Videos and pictures of Israeli soldiers going through Palestinian women's underwear in Gaza went viral, leading MIFTAH, a Palestinian women's advocacy organization, to state they showed "depravity". In March 2024, video clips and photos of female IDF soldiers acting and dancing proactively went viral, with the censored clips shown on Israel's Channel 2. The video showed the female soldiers dancing in their underwear while spanking each other and using their rifles as stripper poles, while the photos showed female soldiers posing in their underwear and exposing their butts. The soldiers in the photos were reported to be disciplined (Amer, 2025).

In May 2024, BBC News reported on a small review of about 45 photos and videos posted by IDF troops from military actions in the occupied West Bank, which showed multiple instances of soldier misconduct. Actions documented and posted included entering homes at night and detaining Palestinians by blindfolding, binding them, at times removing women's headscarves, or forcing them to say "Am Yisrael Chai" (The people of Israel live). In an October 2024 documentary, Al Jazeera published footage from IDF troops' accounts of their actions in Gaza, with Palestinian novelist Sussan Abulhawa being quoted as saying, "We live in an era of technology, and this has been described as the first live-streamed genocide in history." Some of the war crime claims raised in the documentary, with the corresponding footage from social media accounts, are that the IDF systematically targets civilians, journalists, and others, ransacking homes, gleefully celebrating explosions, and going through women's underwear drawers.

In November 2024, IDF soldiers expressed surprise at efforts to identify them through their online activity and worried about potential repercussions.

#### **e. Activism**

This section is an excerpt from the Gaza War: protest war & Technology.

Activists used social media, such as X and TikTok, to share information about the war. Pro-Palestinian activists adopted the watermelon emoji as a symbol to represent solidarity with the people of Gaza. TikTok was a source of ire for some, with people such as former US president Barack Obama criticizing "TikTok activism" for obscuring context. Celebrities, including Sacha Baron Cohen and Amy Schumer, held a private meeting with TikTok executives, accusing them of spreading antisemitism. TikTok stated it was not biased, but that young people were organically more supportive of Palestine. On 18 November, Elon Musk announced that any user who used the phrases "decolonization" or "from the river to the sea" would be suspended from X. Pro-Palestinian content creators in the U.S. reported widespread shadow banning. Critics of Israel also alleged they were censored or shadow-banned on the

comment sections of Finnish National Media outlets in November (Elhosary & Elkashif, 2025).

Anonymous Sudan, a hacker group, launched a DDOS attack on ChatGPT after Tal Broda, a member of OpenAI's leadership, made social media posts that expressed support for Israel and called for more intense bombing in Gaza. In January 2024, the Israeli government reportedly acquired a technological system for conducting large-scale online influence campaigns. In February 2024, Israeli supporters adopted AI tools to report pro-Palestinian content en masse for supposedly violating site guidelines.

Misinformation in the Gaza War is generated by machine learning models that were used by activists to solicit support, as well as to create the artificial impression of broader support. AI-generated images and deepfakes went viral online, though they were simultaneously fact-checked. Technology companies were accused of profiting from AI-generated images related to the war, as well as for building models that generated content reflecting anti-Palestinian biases.

The Israeli prosecutor's office sent over 8,000 removal requests to Meta and TikTok for content related to the war, resulting in 94% of the requests being removed. The Intercept reported Meta had allowed Hebrew and Arabic-language ads, generated by digital rights advocates to test the limits of Facebook's machine-learning moderation, calling for a "holocaust for the Palestinians". In December 2023, Meta's independent oversight board released a report stating Facebook had overly censored conflict-related posts, with civil rights organizations stating Meta had suppressed Palestinian content (Elhosary & Elkashif, 2025). Microsoft and OpenAI have identified influence operations linked to Iran, "intended to undermine support for Israel and trust in U.S. democracy more broadly", using artificial intelligence tools. Analyst John Hultquist of Google's Mandiant Intelligence noted the creativity of Iran-based influence networks, referring to accounts on X pretending to be left-leaning Americans supporting the Palestinian cause, which were found in 2022. During the Gaza war, Iran's strategy included providing financial assistance and posing as students to stoke student-organized protests.

#### **f. The Role of Social Media in Conflict Reporting**

Social media has revolutionized conflict reporting, shifting power away from traditional news outlets toward decentralized, citizen-driven narratives. Platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram allow individuals to post real-time updates, images, and videos, creating a form of "networked witnessing" (Mortensen, 2015; Aondover et al., 2025). In Gaza, where journalists face restricted access, social media becomes a critical tool for amplifying local voices. According to Aouragh (2022), Palestinian activists have used platforms not only to document human rights violations but also to shape international discourse. Memes play a key role in this ecosystem, as their viral potential allows them to reach global audiences quickly.

Social media algorithms, however, present challenges. Pro-Palestinian content is often subjected to censorship or shadow-banning (York, 2021). Despite this, memes continue to circumvent restrictions due to their adaptability, humor, and relatability. By embedding serious messages within entertaining formats, memes maintain visibility in spaces where direct political messaging may be suppressed. Thus, social media has democratized conflict reporting, with memes emerging as one of its most effective tools of communication and mobilization.

#### **g. Memes as a Form of Visual and Political Communication**

Memes function as powerful forms of visual and political communication because they condense complex ideas into symbolic imagery. Visual rhetoric theory (Foss, 2005) suggests that images carry persuasive power by appealing to emotions, values, and identity. Memes, as

multimodal artifacts, combine text, images, and symbols to evoke humor, empathy, or outrage. In the Gaza war context, memes often juxtapose images of destruction with satirical captions critiquing international silence, thereby reframing the conflict for global audiences. Chagas et al. (2019) describe this as “vernacular diplomacy,” where ordinary citizens shape foreign perceptions of conflict through humor and visual storytelling (Aondover et al., 2025). Memes also democratize political communication. Ross and Rivers (2017) note that memes function as digital rhetoric, allowing marginalized groups to contest hegemonic narratives. For Palestinians, this means challenging representations that portray them primarily as aggressors while ignoring humanitarian suffering. Furthermore, memes are adaptable across languages and cultures, making them effective tools for international coverage. A single meme template—such as the “distracted boyfriend” or “two buttons” format can be remixed to represent Gaza-specific issues, ensuring global relatability. Thus, memes bridge cultural divides while amplifying political messages (Aondover et al., 2026).

#### IV. Conclusions

The paper examined how internet memes framed the Gaza War across international digital spaces and demonstrated that memes have become significant instruments of contemporary conflict communication. Far from being simple forms of online entertainment, memes function as powerful communicative artifacts that shape public understanding, influence political discourse, and circulate competing interpretations of complex geopolitical events. Through the combination of visual symbolism, textual brevity, humor, satire, and emotional appeals, memes condensed multifaceted realities of the Gaza War into accessible and highly shareable narratives that reached global audiences at unprecedented speed.

The analysis revealed that international digital narratives surrounding the Gaza War were characterized by diverse and often competing frames. Some memes emphasized humanitarian concerns, highlighting civilian suffering, displacement, and the human costs of war. Others adopted political and ideological frames that portrayed the conflict through lenses of resistance, self-defense, occupation, nationalism, or international diplomacy. In many cases, memes reflected the political orientations, cultural contexts, and ideological commitments of the communities that produced and circulated them. As a result, the same conflict was represented in markedly different ways across digital environments, illustrating how online communication spaces serve as arenas of symbolic contestation where competing actors seek to define reality and influence public opinion.

It was discovered that memes perform essential framing functions by selecting particular aspects of a conflict, emphasizing certain interpretations, assigning responsibility, and encouraging specific emotional responses. Through these processes, memes contributed to the construction of meaning around the Gaza War, shaping perceptions of victims, aggressors, allies, and international actors. The findings underscore the capacity of memes to simplify complex geopolitical issues into emotionally resonant narratives that can mobilize support, generate solidarity, reinforce existing beliefs, or deepen polarization.

The paper also highlighted the transnational nature of digital communication in contemporary conflicts. Internet memes crossed geographical and cultural boundaries, enabling individuals and communities worldwide to participate in discussions about the Gaza War regardless of their proximity to the conflict. This global circulation facilitated the emergence of interconnected digital publics while simultaneously exposing the fragmented nature of online discourse, where algorithmic amplification, ideological echo chambers, and selective exposure often reinforced divergent interpretations of events.

The paper concludes that internet memes have become influential framing devices within the modern information ecosystem, particularly during periods of armed conflict and geopolitical crisis. Their ability to communicate complex messages quickly, evoke strong emotional reactions, and spread across platforms makes them important actors in the formation of public opinion and digital political culture. Understanding how memes frame conflicts such as the Gaza War is therefore essential for scholars of media, communication, conflict studies, and digital politics. As digital platforms continue to shape global conversations about war and international affairs, critical engagement with meme culture becomes increasingly necessary for understanding how contemporary narratives are constructed, contested, and disseminated in the networked public sphere.

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