

**Audience Trolling and News Framing on X: A Comparative Analysis of BBC
and Al Jazeera Coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

By

Iman Oluwakemisola Atolagbe

Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Mass Communication Department

atolagbeimankems@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6562-5727>

Monsurat Modasola Wonuola (PhD)

Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Mass Communication Department

wonuolamm@alhikmah.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9790-1547>

Faosat Biola Olagunju (PhD.)

Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Nigeria

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of Languages (English Unit)

fbolagunju@alhikmah.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5905-5095>

Rasaq Atanda Ajadi (PhD)

Federal University of Health Sciences, Ila-Orangun, Osun State

Faculty of Health Humanities and Multidisciplinary Studies

Department of Health Humanities (General Studies Unit)

rasaq.ajadi@fuhsi.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6772-8977>

Abstract

This study investigates how social media affordances enable audience engagement with, and contestation of, media representations of conflict, focusing on trolling as a form of discursive response. Trolling is operationalised as antagonistic, sarcastic, or provocative user comments that challenge, mock, or delegitimise media narratives and actors. Using systematic sampling, 61 posts from each of BBC and Al Jazeera and 1,220 associated comments (610 per outlet) were collected from their X handles between October 7, 2023, and April 7, 2024. A quantitative content analysis, guided by framing theory, was deployed to examine audience responses to media coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Findings indicate that both outlets predominantly employed victim, human interest, and conflict frames. Audience responses revealed that netizens' sentiments towards the media organisations and warring parties were closely associated with patterns of trolling, especially through sarcasm, ridicule, and counter-framing strategies. In visual framing, Al Jazeera more frequently used emotionally evocative imagery, whereas BBC employed relatively neutral visuals. The study concludes that audience interactions on X reflect a complex relationship between institutional framing and participatory digital discourse, with trolling serving as a form of emotional and ideological engagement. It recommends that media professionals adopt reflective, context-aware framing strategies in highly interactive digital environments.

Keywords: social media trolling, framing, credibility, netizens, BBC, Al Jazeera

Introduction

The dominant focus of scholarship on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been the framing strategies of institutional media, yet comparatively limited attention has been paid to how digital audiences actively contest, disrupt, and reinterpret these frames through trolling practices on social media platforms. This imbalance leaves an incomplete account of contemporary conflict communication, particularly within digitally networked environments where audiences are no longer passive recipients but active co-constructors of meaning.

Framing theory posits that media do not merely report events but organise and present them in ways that shape interpretation, salience, and public understanding. Studies grounded in framing analysis have demonstrated patterned ideological leanings in the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, Rizova and Panayotova (2021) show that Al Jazeera framed Palestinians predominantly as victims, while CNN foregrounded Israel as a legitimate defender; the BBC adopted comparatively less explicit victim framing. Similarly, Shahzad et al. (2023) identify pro-Palestine frames in RT and Al Jazeera and pro-Israel frames in BBC and CNN, alongside variations in conflict and human-interest frames. Arrosyid and Halwati

(2021) further argue that media framing in Indonesian online outlets contributed to escalating tensions rather than fostering de-escalation.

While these studies are analytically rigorous, they remain largely confined to institutional media outputs and rely predominantly on traditional content analysis. Such an approach implicitly treats audiences as interpretive endpoints rather than discursive agents. However, the architecture of digital media has fundamentally altered this dynamic. Drawing on participatory culture theory, contemporary audiences are understood as active contributors who appropriate, remix, resist, and publicly evaluate media narratives. Social media platforms, therefore, function as arenas of discursive negotiation where media authority is continually scrutinised and contested.

Within the framework of the digital public sphere, online comment spaces attached to news organisations represent micro-publics in which competing interpretations of conflict are articulated, amplified, and legitimised. Trolling, in this context, is not merely deviant behaviour but can operate as a strategic communicative act, deploying sarcasm, ridicule, provocation, or antagonism to delegitimise institutional narratives, expose perceived bias, or mobilise ideological alignment. Such practices may influence how media credibility is constructed, eroded, or defended in real time during conflict reporting.

The October 2023 escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict offers a critical site for examining this intersection between institutional framing and digitally mediated audience contestation. By shifting analytical focus from media frames to audience trolling practices directed at outlets such as Al Jazeera and BBC, this study extends framing scholarship into the terrain of participatory conflict discourse. In doing so, it advances an integrative approach that situates institutional media narratives and audience counter-discourses within the same communicative ecology of the digital public sphere.

Despite extensive scholarship on media framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is insufficient empirical and theoretical engagement with how digital audiences actively troll news organisations and how such trolling shapes perceptions of media credibility and conflict discourse, particularly during high-intensity episodes such as the October 2023 escalation. Existing studies have effectively mapped pro-Israel and pro-Palestine framing patterns across global news platforms (Arrosyid &

Halwati, 2021; Rizova & Panayotova, 2021; Shahzad et al., 2023). However, these analyses largely privilege institutional agenda-setting and framing processes, leaving underexplored the participatory dimension of meaning-making in digital environments. In other words, while we understand how media frame the conflict, we know far less about how audiences respond to, resist, ridicule, or strategically undermine those frames through trolling practices.

This omission constitutes a significant theoretical and empirical gap. In a networked public sphere, credibility is no longer solely constructed through institutional authority but is continually negotiated through audience interaction. Without analysing trolling as a discursive practice embedded within participatory culture, scholarly accounts of conflict communication risk remaining structurally incomplete. Accordingly, this study addresses the following problem: How do social media users employ trolling practices in response to conflict reporting by major international news outlets, and what are the implications of these practices for media credibility and the discursive construction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the October 2023 escalation? This study extends framing theory into the participatory digital context, contributes to debates on the digital public sphere, and deepens understanding of credibility politics in contemporary conflict communication through the analysis of audience-driven antagonistic discourse.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

1. examine the patterns of news framing adopted by Al Jazeera and BBC through their X social media handles in the coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict;
2. analyse the dominant patterns of trolling expressed by netizens in response to the coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict by Al Jazeera and BBC on social media; and
3. investigate how the types of pictures accompanying stories posted by Al Jazeera and BBC on the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict on social media are associated with patterns of netizens' trolling.

Research Questions

This study provides answers to the following research questions.

1. What patterns of news framing are adopted by Al Jazeera and BBC in their X coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict?
2. What are the dominant patterns of trolling expressed by netizens in response to the X posts of Al Jazeera and BBC on the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict?
3. How are the types of images accompanying X posts by Al Jazeera and BBC associated with patterns of netizens' trolling?

Theoretical Framework

Scholarship on media and conflict communication has been significantly shaped by Framing Theory, which explains how news organisations construct meaning through processes of selection, emphasis, and exclusion. Foundational work by Robert Entman (1993, 2003) conceptualises framing as the process of defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements, and suggesting remedies. Within this tradition, studies have consistently demonstrated that media coverage of conflicts is rarely neutral; rather, it reflects patterned ideological orientations and institutional priorities. Research on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, shows that outlets such as BBC and Al Jazeera deploy frames that variously foreground victimhood, legitimacy, and conflict escalation (Philo & Berry, 2011; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014; Shahzad et al., 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights into media construction of reality, they predominantly adopt a media-centric orientation, often treating audiences as passive endpoints of meaning transmission.

This limitation has been widely noted in contemporary media theory, which increasingly foregrounds the role of audiences as active interpreters of mediated content. Drawing on reception theory, Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model demonstrates that audiences do not simply absorb media frames but may negotiate or oppose them based on socio-cultural positioning. This perspective is further developed within participatory culture scholarship, particularly in the work of Henry Jenkins (2006), who argues that digital media environments enable users to become contributors, critics, and co-creators of content. In networked platforms such as X, audience engagement is not only immediate but also publicly visible, transforming media consumption into a collective and discursive practice (Papacharissi, 2015; Bruns, 2015). Consequently, meaning-making in contemporary media ecosystems is

better understood as an interactive process rather than a unidirectional flow from producers to audiences.

Within this evolving communicative landscape, emerging scholarship has begun to examine antagonistic and disruptive forms of audience engagement, particularly trolling. Existing studies define trolling as deliberate provocation, antagonism, or disruption within online interactions (Hardaker, 2010; Phillips, 2015; Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014). However, beyond its behavioural and psychological dimensions, recent research has increasingly conceptualised trolling as a discursive practice embedded within political and ideological contestation (Muddiman, 2019; Polak & Trottier, 2020). In the context of conflict reporting, trolling may function as a form of counter-framing, whereby audiences challenge perceived media bias, contest narrative authority, and introduce alternative interpretations of events. This perspective aligns with broader debates in digital communication that emphasise the role of users in reshaping public discourse and destabilising institutional narratives.

Despite these advances, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the systematic integration of trolling into framing theory. While framing studies have extensively analysed how media construct conflict narratives, and digital communication research has explored audience participation and online antagonism, few studies explicitly connect these domains within a unified analytical framework. As a result, the relationship between institutional frames and audience-generated counter-discourses remains under-theorised, particularly in high-intensity conflict contexts such as the October 2023 escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The present study adopts a structured and processual model of framing, articulated as follows: *institutional frames* → *audience interpretation* → *trolling (counter-frames)* → *credibility negotiation* (see figure 1 below) to address this gap.

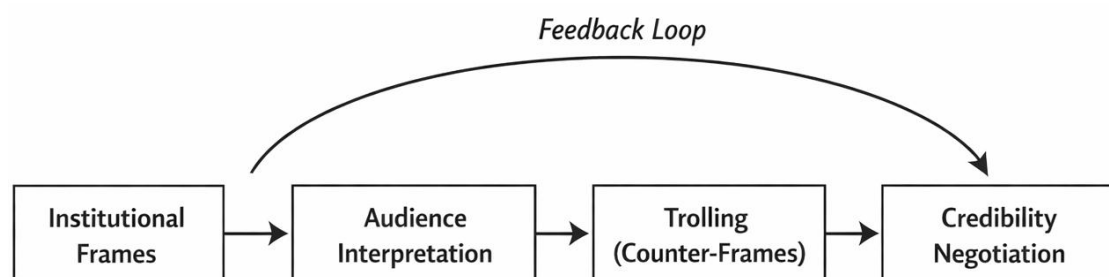


Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic interplay between institutional media framing, audience interpretation, trolling (counter-frames), and credibility negotiation in digitally mediated conflict communication. At the first stage, institutional media construct interpretive schemas through selective framing, emphasising certain aspects of events while omitting others, thereby shaping how audiences perceive and understand issues.

At the second stage, audiences engage in interpretive decoding, negotiating, resisting, or accepting media frames based on ideological, socio-cultural, and personal factors. Following this, audiences may participate in trolling as a form of counter-framing, deploying sarcasm, ridicule, provocation, or antagonistic commentary to publicly contest, challenge, or delegitimise institutional narratives. These counter-frames interact with perceptions of media credibility, which, in digitally mediated environments, are increasingly fluid, relational, and co-constructed rather than fixed. The model incorporates a feedback loop, whereby the outcomes of credibility negotiation, whether reinforcement, destabilisation, or recalibration of trust, inform subsequent institutional framing. This creates a continuous, interactive cycle in which media producers and audiences mutually influence one another. The model highlights how institutional framing, audience interpretation, and trolling collectively contribute to the co-construction of meaning, authority, and legitimacy in online conflict discourse (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Couldry, 2012).

However, while prior studies often treat credibility as an outcome directly measurable through audience perception surveys, this study adopts a more cautious position. Drawing on digital media theory (Couldry, 2012; van Dijck, 2013), it suggests that credibility may be discursively negotiated through observable audience practices such as trolling, rather than assuming it as a stable attribute or directly measured variable. In this sense, trolling becomes analytically significant not only as a communicative behaviour but also as an indicator of broader struggles over trust, authority, and legitimacy in the digital public sphere.

Therefore, framing theory, participatory culture, and digital communication research are synthesised in this study to contribute to conflict communication by extending framing theory beyond its traditional media-centric focus through the incorporation of audience agency as a central analytical component. The study reconceptualises trolling as a meaning-making practice rather than merely deviant online behaviour, hence, situating it within the logic of counter-framing. Lastly, it advances scholarly understanding of credibility in networked environments by highlighting how it may emerge from ongoing interactions between institutional narratives and audience responses. Consequently, this theoretical framework provides a conceptual foundation for analysing the interplay between media framing and audience contestation in contemporary conflict communication. It offers a more nuanced account of how meaning, power, and legitimacy are negotiated in digitally mediated public spheres.

Social Media, Trolling and Conflict Discourse

Social media has evolved into both a tool for information dissemination and a contested space where global conflicts are amplified, reframed, and debated. Platforms such as Twitter (X) enable rapid circulation of news while simultaneously facilitating public interaction with media content. Unlike traditional media, social media environments are defined by their participatory affordances, allowing users to respond to and reinterpret information in real time (Bruns, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015).

These affordances extend the reach of institutional media while also exposing their narratives to continuous public scrutiny. News organisations increasingly use social media to distribute content and reinforce editorial framing; however, these same platforms enable audiences to contest and reinterpret those frames. As a result, social media functions as both an extension of institutional communication and a site of discursive negotiation.

Trolling exemplifies this interaction. It involves deliberate provocation or antagonistic engagement that challenges individuals or institutions online (Demsar et al., 2021). Within the scope of this study, trolling is approached as a patterned form of audience response reflecting ideological positioning, emotional engagement, and reactions to perceived media bias. Motivations for trolling may include political alignment, identity expression, or attempts to undermine perceived authority (Polak & Trottier, 2020; Clucas, 2020; Mikoley, 2022).

In conflict contexts, these dynamics become more pronounced. Media framing of events can generate strong audience reactions, particularly when perceived as biased or incomplete. Social media amplifies these reactions, creating feedback loops in which audience responses, including trolling, interact with and reshape the circulation of news narratives. Consequently, trolling provides a valuable analytical lens for examining how audiences engage with, resist, and transform media representations of conflict.

This study emphasises that audience interactions are central to contemporary media processes. By situating trolling within the broader ecology of social media and conflict communication, social media users are, rather than being passive consumers, active participants whose responses contribute to the ongoing construction and contestation of meaning in digitally mediated conflict discourse.

Research Methodology

This study adopts an explanatory research design to investigate social media trolling of BBC and Al Jazeera coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its implications for news credibility among netizens. Explanatory research is appropriate because it identifies key variables, examines patterns, and provides insight into relationships underlying observed phenomena (Rahi, 2017). The study is situated within a quantitative paradigm, using content analysis to systematically examine news stories and associated audience reactions on X (formerly Twitter). Quantitative content analysis allows for replicable measurement of media frames and audience engagement (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2020).

The population consisted of all X posts published by BBC and Al Jazeera between October 7, 2023, and April 7, 2024, covering 184 days for each outlet, with a total of 368 for six months. A systematic sampling method was applied, selecting one post every third day, yielding 61 posts per outlet (122 posts total). For trolling analysis, the first 10 comments under each sampled post were extracted at the time of data collection. This resulted in 610 comments per outlet (1,220 total), ensuring a comprehensive capture of audience engagement.

The study uses a structured coding frame adapted from Karyotakis, Panagiotou, Antonopoulos, and Kiourexidou (2017). It focuses on five relevant news frames: civil unrest, public affairs, human interest, conflict, and economic frames. The

sports frame was excluded as irrelevant to this study's focus. Visual frames for image content were drawn from Rizova and Panayotova (2021), including sensational images, violent images, destruction images, harm and injury images, and neutral images.

Story sources were classified as follows.

- i. Victims: Individuals directly affected by the conflict.
- ii. Security personnel: Actors such as Israel Defence Forces (IDF) or Hamas.
- iii. Social groups: Interest groups such as protesters.
- iv. Government officials: Political figures, e.g., Benjamin Netanyahu, Mohammad Mustafa.
- v. International bodies: Actors such as the United Nations.

Story frames were coded as presented below.

- Civil unrest: Coverage of immediate chaotic outcomes of conflict.
- Public affairs: Political or institutional responses.
- Human interest: Emotional engagement narratives.
- Conflict: Hostility and interactions between opposing actors.
- Economic: Economic consequences of the conflict.

Visual frames followed Rizova and Panayotova (2021): sensational, violent, destruction, harm/injury, and neutral images.

To address conceptual inflation and clearly distinguish trolling from legitimate commentary, trolling was operationalised in this study as comments that are antagonistic, aggressive, or delegitimising towards either media outlets or conflict actors, rather than all partisan expressions.

- Criteria for trolling:
 1. Ridicule or sarcasm targeting the news outlet or its coverage.
 2. Personal attacks or ad hominem statements directed at journalists or institutional sources.
 3. Aggressive, inflammatory, or hate-inciting content aimed at conflict actors.
- Distinguished from non-trolling:

- Legitimate criticism (reasoned disagreement with factual content)
- Partisan expression that does not attack the media or actors

Trolling categories coded:

- Pro Al Jazeera/Anti BBC
- Pro BBC/Anti Al Jazeera
- Pro Israel/Anti-Palestine
- Pro Palestine/Anti-Israel
- None/Neutral

This operationalisation ensures that trolling is not equated with simple ideological positioning, reducing conceptual overreach.

For intercoder reliability, four trained undergraduate coders (two male, two female) conducted the coding. Coders were trained over two weeks, with pilot coding of eight posts to establish competence. Intercoder reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa (κ):

$$[\kappa = \frac{P_o - P_e}{1 - P_e}]$$

where (P_o) is the observed agreement, and (P_e) is the expected agreement:

$$[P_e = \frac{\sum (A_i \times B_i)}{N^2}]$$

Here, (A_i) and (B_i) are the proportions of categories assigned by each coder, and (N) is the total number of items.

- Story frames: $\kappa = 0.82$
- Visual frames: $\kappa = 0.78$
- Trolling categories: $\kappa = 0.80$

All κ values exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.75, indicating strong reliability.

Data Collection

Data were collected directly from the X handles of BBC and Al Jazeera using a manual extraction process. Each post was coded for:

1. Textual story frames
2. Visual frames
3. Story source
4. Comments, classified into trolling and non-trolling based on the criteria above

This procedure ensures comprehensive coverage of both institutional framing and audience counter-framing, providing a robust empirical basis for examining the interplay between media frames, trolling, and the inferred negotiation of credibility.

Data were collected directly from the X handles of BBC and Al Jazeera at the Al-Hikmah University Library. Each post within the sample frame was coded for both textual and visual frames, as well as story source. Trolling activity associated with each post was also recorded, providing insights into how netizens respond to the frames presented by the media outlets. By combining systematic sampling with a validated coding scheme and rigorous reliability checks, the study ensures a robust empirical foundation for analysing the interactions between media frames, audience reactions, and perceptions of credibility.

Results

RQ1: What are the patterns of news framing adopted by Al Jazeera and BBC via their social media handles for their coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Table 1: The frequency of story sources on BBC and Al Jazeera on the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict from October 7 2023 to April 7 2024.

Story Source	Victim	Security Personnel	Social Groups	Government Officials	International Bodies	Others	Total
Al Jazeera	22 (36.1%)	8 (13.1%)	3 (4.9%)	16 (26.2%)	12 (19.7%)	0 (0%)	61 (100%)
BBC	20 (32.8%)	6 (9.8%)	7 (11.5%)	13 (21.3%)	10 (16.4%)	5 (8.2%)	61 (100%)

Table 1 shows the frequency of story sources on Al Jazeera and BBC regarding the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict from October 7, 2023, to April 7, 2024.

The table reveals that stories reported from victims' perspectives concerning the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Al Jazeera's X handle take prominence with 22 (36.1%) stories. Meanwhile, 8 stories (13.1%) was reported from a security personnel's angle, 3 (4.9%) stories from the perspective of a social group, 16 stories (26.2%) from the government official's angle and 12 stories (19.7%) from the international bodies' perspective. The victim perspective is the most significant story source with 36.1% frequency.

Also, the table shows the stories reported on BBC regarding the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict from varying angles. From the table, the victim perspective recorded 20 stories (32.8%) while stories from the security personnel's angle was 6 (9.8%). Stories reported from the perspective of social groups is 7 (11.5%), government officials' angle is 13 (21.3%) and international bodies' stories are 10 (16.4%). Other story sources used by BBC were 5 (8.2%). For BBC, stories reported from the angle of victims attract the most frequency (32.8%) which is close to Al Jazeera's 36.1% and indicates a point of convergence in perspectives.

Table 2: The story frames employed by BBC and Al Jazeera on the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict from October 7 2023 to April 7 2024.

Story Frame	Civil Unrest	Human Interest	Conflict	Economy	Public Affairs	Total
Al Jazeera	3 (4.9%)	23 (37.7%)	20 (32.8%)	0 (0%)	15 (24.6%)	61 (100%)
BBC	7 (11.5%)	20 (32.8%)	22 (36.1%)	0 (0%)	12 (19.6%)	61 (100%)

Table 2 presents the analysis of the story frames used in the reportage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict from October 7, 2023, to April 7, 2024, on Al Jazeera and BBC. The table shows that the civil unrest frame on Al Jazeera's X handle is 3 (4.9%). The human interest frame has 23 (37.7%) stories, the conflict frame has 20 (32.8%) while the economic is zero (0), the public affairs story frame had 15 (24.6%). Hence, for Al Jazeera, the human interest frame of 23 (37.7%) is mostly used in the reportage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Also, the table shows that there are different story frames employed on BBC's X handle regarding the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As illustrated in Table 2, the human interest frame has 20 (32.8%) while the conflict frame recorded 22 (36.1%). The stories with a public affairs frame are 12 (19.6%) while the civil unrest and economic frames were not represented. BBC reportage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict reveals that the conflict frame has the highest frequency of (36.1%) implying that BBC, unlike Al Jazeera, emphasises the human interest frame and not conflict, civil unrest, economy or public affairs frames.

The analysis reveals that the victim story source is predominantly used by both Al Jazeera and BBC. However, while Al Jazeera uses the human interest frame, BBC adopts the conflict frame.

RQ 2: What are the factors that are responsible for netizens' trolling of Al Jazeera's and BBC's 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict reportage on social media?

- Pro Al Jazeera/Anti BBC: this has to do with comments that are in favour of Al Jazeera and against BBC.
- Pro BBC/Anti Al Jazeera: this involves comments that favours BBC and antagonise Al Jazeera.
- Pro Israel/Anti-Palestine: this refers to comments that are directly or indirectly express sentiments for Israel and troll Palestine.
- Pro-Palestine/Anti-Israel: this refers to those comments that are directly or indirectly express sentiments for Palestine and frown against Israel.
- None Trolls/Absent Comments: this refers to comments that are neutral or not relating to the context of this study.

Table 3: Trolling by netizens on BBC and Al Jazeera on the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict from October 7 2023 to April 7 2024.

Trolling by Netizens	Pro Al Jazeera/Anti BBC	Al Jazeera	Pro BBC/Anti Al Jazeera	Pro Israel/Anti-Palestine	Pro-Palestine/Anti-Israel	None Trolls/Absent Comments	Total
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Al Jazeera	4	19	57	423	107	610
	0.7%	3.1%	9.3%	69.3%	17.5%	100%
BBC	82	16	45	369	98	610
	13.4%	2.2%	7.4%	60.5%	16.1%	100%

Table 3 represents the frequency of 360 trolls by netizens on the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Al Jazeera's and BBC's X handles. For Al Jazeera, trolls that are Pro-Al Jazeera/Anti-BBC are 4 (0.7%). 19 trolls (3.1%) are Pro-BBC but Anti-Al Jazeera while 57 trolls (9.3%) are Pro-Israel but Anti-Palestine and 432 trolls (69.3%) are Pro-Palestine but Anti-Israel. There are 107 non-trolls (17.5%) (i.e., comments that are not related to the story or event).

Trolls on BBC regarding the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is Pro-Al Jazeera but Anti-BBC are 82 (13.4%), while trolls that are Pro-BBC but Anti-Al Jazeera are 16 (2.2%) and 45 trolls (7.4%) are Pro-Israel but Anti-Palestine. 369 trolls (60.5%) are pro-Palestine but anti-Israel. However, there are 98 non-trolls (16.1%) on the story.

The analysis shows that BBC is more trolled by netizens than Al Jazeera. Also, the trolling of Israel on the Al Jazeera X handle is high compared to the BBC X handle. On the other hand, Palestine is trolled on the BBC X handle than on Al Jazeera X handle.

RQ 3: What are the types of pictures that accompany the stories posted by Al Jazeera and BBC on the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict on social media?

The yardstick for analysing the picture types that accompany the stories are highlighted as follows.

- Sensational images: these are images that heighten emotional reactions rather than incite objective evaluation.
- Violence images: these are images that portray violence.
- Destruction images: these are images that show destroyed houses and infrastructure.
- Harms and injuries images: these are images that represent persons with injuries and mutilations.

- Neutral images: these are neutral images, which may include pictures of the head of state, the governors, spokespersons and so on.

Table 4: The types of pictures that accompany stories posted on Al Jazeera and BBC on the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict on social media

Picture Types	Sensation al Image	Violence Image	Destruction Image	Harms and Injuries Image	Neutral Image	Total
Al Jazeera	25	0	15	3	18	61
	40.9%	0%	24.6%	4.9%	29.5%	100%
BBC	21	4	12	0	24	61
	34.4%	6.6%	19.7%	0%	39.3%	100%

Table 4 shows the frequency of picture types used to accompany stories in the reportage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Al Jazeera uses 25 sensational images (40.9%) with 15 destruction images (24.6%). There are 3 (4.9%) harms and injuries images and 18 (29.5%) neutral images.

For BBC, stories with sensational images are 21 (34.4%). Meanwhile, 12 (19.7%) destruction images are used, while 4 (6.6%) violence images and 24 (39.3%) neutral images, are also used. There is no Harm and Injuries image used.

Al Jazeera makes use of sensational images more while BBC adopts more neutral images. Also, while BBC avoids harm and injury images, Al Jazeera incorporates a relatively small proportion of harm- and injury-related images, suggesting a cautious visual strategy that tempers the potentially intensifying effects such depictions could have on the perception of the conflict.

Discussion of Findings

This study investigates how social media trolling of BBC and Al Jazeera coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict shapes perceptions of news credibility among netizens. The discussion below is organised according to the

research objectives, critically interrogating the patterns of news framing, audience responses, and visual representations, while situating the findings within the broader scholarly discourse.

The first research question examines the patterns of news framing adopted by Al Jazeera and BBC on their X handles in covering the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Using the coding framework adapted from Karyotakis et al. (2017), alongside story source classifications (victims, security personnel, social groups, government officials, international bodies), the study finds that the conflict frame, human interest frame, and victim sources dominate the reportage. Specifically, Al Jazeera tends to foreground human interest narratives and the experiences of victims, which may be interpreted by audiences as conveying a more sympathetic orientation towards Palestinian civilians. BBC, in contrast, privileges the conflict frame, emphasising hostility and strategic developments.

These findings corroborate Shahzad et al. (2023), who observed similar divergences in media coverage, with Al Jazeera emphasising human interest and BBC foregrounding conflict dynamics. However, this study extends prior scholarship by linking these framing choices to the social media context, revealing how audience engagement on X interacts with these frames, producing trolling behaviour that challenges or reinforces perceived media positioning.

Moreover, the nomenclature used by each outlet is telling: Al Jazeera labels the conflict “Israel-Palestine,” reflecting a broader framing of the conflict, whereas BBC uses “Israel-Gaza,” narrowing focus to Gaza as the epicentre of hostilities. This aligns with Caplan’s (2019) assertion that media outlets often construct selective boundaries around conflicts, reflecting editorial and institutional orientations. Conceptually, this demonstrates that framing is not merely about story selection but also about defining the conflict itself, thereby shaping audience interpretation and subsequent online reactions.

The second research question investigates how social media trolling reflects perceptions of credibility. Analysis reveals that BBC’s coverage is more frequently targeted by trolling, which may be interpreted by audiences as a response to perceived imbalances in framing or expectations of neutrality. Several interacting factors appear to account for this pattern. First, the BBC’s global reputation for impartiality may generate what can be described as a “neutrality paradox,” where any perceived

deviation invites intensified scrutiny and contestation. Second, the higher volume and global reach of BBC content potentially expose it to more ideologically diverse audiences, increasing the likelihood of conflicting interpretations and antagonistic engagement. Third, the predominance of conflict-oriented framing may foreground strategic or militarised narratives that provoke critical reactions from audiences seeking alternative perspectives.

Al Jazeera, by contrast, encounters comparatively less trolling, a pattern that may be interpreted as reflecting a closer alignment between its framing strategies and the expectations of segments of its audience, particularly in relation to human interest narratives. Rather than indicating the absence of critique, this suggests that trolling is unevenly distributed across platforms depending on how audiences interpret institutional framing and credibility claims.

These findings reinforce prior work by Shahzad et al. (2023), which documented differing audience perceptions of BBC and Al Jazeera coverage. Yet, this study contributes theoretically by highlighting the active role of netizens as interpreters and agents of accountability. Drawing on framing theory, the findings suggest that media frames do not operate in isolation; audience reception on social media generates feedback loops that can validate, contest, or destabilise the intended framing, with direct consequences for perceived credibility. In this sense, trolling operates both as a reaction to framing and as a form of counter-framing that interrogates media authority.

The third research question considers the types of images accompanying headlines. Findings indicate that Al Jazeera predominantly uses sensational images, capturing violence, destruction, and injury, thereby heightening emotional engagement and reinforcing human interest frames. However, it also incorporates a relatively small proportion of harm- and injury-related images, suggesting a cautious visual strategy that tempers the potentially intensifying effects such depictions could have on the perception of the conflict. BBC, conversely, relies more on neutral images, reflecting gatekeeping practices associated with established journalistic norms of balance and restraint (Rizova & Panayotova, 2021).

This distinction has conceptual implications: visual framing on social media not only shapes immediate affective responses but also intersects with textual frames to influence trolling behaviour and credibility perceptions. Sensational images may

provoke stronger emotional reactions, increasing both engagement and critique, whereas neutral images may attenuate immediate audience outrage while still inviting scrutiny regarding framing choices. This nuanced finding extends the work of Rizova and Panayotova (2021) by linking visual framing to audience-mediated dynamics in social media spaces, rather than considering images solely as static representations.

These findings advance the literature in several ways. First, they demonstrate that media framing on social media cannot be fully understood without considering audience interaction, particularly trolling, which functions as both critique and counter-framing. Second, the study shows that frames and visual representations are not neutral; they are culturally and institutionally resonant, shaping perceptions of credibility in ways that extend beyond traditional media effects. Third, while prior studies have established variations in how different outlets are perceived, this study reveals the differentiated impact of these frames in digital contexts, highlighting how netizens actively co-construct the meaning and perceived legitimacy of news content.

Conceptually and theoretically, the study positions social media trolling as a critical lens for evaluating news credibility. By integrating framing theory with audience agency, it challenges the conventional assumption that media power is unidirectional. Instead, the findings suggest a dynamic interplay between institutional framing, visual rhetoric, and participatory audience responses, contributing both to the extension of framing theory and to an enriched understanding of the digital public sphere in conflict communication.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that framing patterns in news reporting on social media are not neutral but are implicated in shaping audience reactions, particularly in conflict contexts. The findings indicate that both Al Jazeera and BBC employ distinctive news frames, with victim sources and conflict frames dominating their coverage of the 2023 Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These framing patterns are associated with patterns of trolling, illustrating how audience engagement can both contest and reinforce media narratives.

The study further shows that visual framing complements textual frames: Al Jazeera relies on sensational images, which are associated with heightened emotional engagement and more intense trolling, whereas BBC's use of neutral images reflects a

more restrained approach which aligned with traditional gatekeeping practices. Conceptually, this underscores that visual and textual framing are interdependent mechanisms through which media outlets are implicated in shaping audience perception, interpretation, and engagement on digital platforms.

In relation to previous scholarship, the findings partly corroborate existing studies. Consistent with Shahzad et al. (2023), Al Jazeera's coverage may be interpreted by audiences as more sympathetic to Palestinian victims, whereas BBC emphasises conflict dynamics, which some audiences interpret as reflecting pro-Israel leanings. Likewise, the observation that Al Jazeera uses sensational images aligns with Rizova and Panayotova (2021). However, this study extends prior research by situating these framing patterns within the social media context, highlighting how netizens actively respond to, interpret, and challenge frames through trolling, an aspect largely absent in earlier studies that focused on traditional media coverage.

Theoretically, the study advances framing theory by demonstrating that the influence of media frames is interactive in digital contexts: rather than solely shaping audience perceptions, frames are taken up, negotiated, and sometimes resisted through audience responses, contributing to the co-construction of meaning, credibility, and public discourse. By linking media framing to trolling behaviour, the study positions social media users as active agents in the digital public sphere, capable of negotiating, contesting, or amplifying media narratives. This insight contributes to theory development by integrating audience agency into the framing paradigm that moves beyond the traditional assumption of passive media consumption.

Finally, the findings have practical implications for media outlets: understanding how framing patterns, both textual and visual, are associated with audience responses on social media can inform editorial strategies that balance emotional engagement with credibility maintenance. The study therefore contributes to the literature on media, conflict communication, and digital public discourse by bridging the gap between traditional framing analysis and participatory audience behaviour. It offers a more cautious and nuanced account of how media credibility is negotiated in online spaces.

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