INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES BULLETIN
ISSN: (E) 3007-1917 (P) 3007-1909

Volume 4, Issue 3, 2026

PLATFORM AFFORDANCES AND CONFLICT NARRATIVES: A DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF U.S.-IRAN CONFLICT FRAMING ACROSS X, TIKTOK, AND YOUTUBE

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24102598

Received	Accepted	Published
01 January 2026	17 March 2026	31 March 2026

ABSTRACT

In 2026, the conflict between the United States and Iran expanded beyond diplomatic and maritime communications to social media platforms, each creating a different public narrative of the confrontation. In this paper, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) has been employed to analyze how the conflict was represented on three types of platforms that have distinct technical and social affordances: X (real-time textual discourse); TikTok (short-form audiovisual virality); and YouTube (long-form videos, and crucially, platform moderation). The analysis is based on a verified, publicly stated corpus of documents, platform-moderation events, and independently fact-checked viral phenomena from February to September 2026 and identifies recurring strategies of nomination, predication, argumentation, and perspectivization, as well as how platform architecture (such as the platform's own moderation policy) systematically shapes which version of the conflict is at the fore for which publics. The paper's main thesis is exemplified by a case in which a pro-Iran YouTube channel was banned but maintained in its original form on three other platforms. The study contends that one cannot theorize conflict framing in the digital age without considering the platform and its governance as co-creators of meaning, and it proposes a cross-platform DHA framework as a contribution to digital social research on mediatized conflict.

Keywords: *discourse-historical approach, critical discourse analysis, platform affordances, conflict framing, digital social research, U.S.-Iran conflict, social media.*

1. INTRODUCTION

By early 2026, Iran and the United States were in open conflict, with each side implementing a series of sanctions and threats. On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel conducted joint air strikes against Iran, killing the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and several top Iranian military officials, which led to Iran launching missile and drone attacks against Israel and U.S. assets in the region, thus sparking the 2026 Iran War. Fighting has erupted in waves since then, including a Strait of Hormuz mining incident and U.S. strikes at the end of August and beginning of September, which, as of this writing, remain unresolved.

What sets this conflict apart from other battles in the rivalry is the speed and division of the mediation. Competing narratives would spread like wildfire across X, TikTok, and YouTube within hours of every platform-moderation decision, official statement, and strike, each looking distinctly different from the others. An unfolding naval skirmish between the U.S. and Iran in the Strait of Hormuz gets amplified on wire services before being repurposed as a synthetic AI-generated video set to music on TikTok, while a YouTube channel mocking the U.S. war effort is immediately banned and then transferred to X, Instagram, and Telegram in short order. This paper asks: what can a cross-platform analysis of conflict discourse between the U.S. and Iran reveal that single-platform studies cannot?

The question falls squarely within digital social research, as it is not about delivering opinion through a pre-designed channel but about how platforms shape discourse. In this regard, the paper aims at two clear goals: (1) to examine the five discourse-historical strategies of nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation across X, TikTok, and YouTube's coverage of the same conflict events, (2) to theorize, using a combined DHA-affordance framework, how platform architecture systematically shapes and explains the variation and differences of the five discourse-historical strategies across the three platforms for the same conflict events. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 examines critical discourse studies and platform studies as they converge in recent conflict communication scholarship. Section 3 introduces a combined analytical framework drawing on the Discourse-Historical Approach and platform affordance theory. Section 4 outlines the study's qualitative methodology. Section 5 presents the cross-platform analysis, and Section 6 discusses implications for the study of mediatized conflict before the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Media texts have been viewed as the locus of "naturalizing" power relations through the use of language, argumentation, and story construction, and this has been the case for a long time already, as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been looking at them for a long time (Fairclough, 1995). The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) by Reisigl and Wodak carried on this tradition, which required that discourse be read in its historical as well as intertextual context, and which identified discursive strategies for the construction of social actors and events: nomination (naming), predication (attributing qualities), argumentation (justifying claims), perspectivization (positioning a viewpoint as objective), intensification or mitigation of claims (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

Alternatively, framing theory: Entman (1993) describes framing as the selection and salience of aspects of a perceived reality which "favor a problem definition, a causal interpretation, and a moral evaluation". In the field of conflict reporting, framing investigations have consistently found that the same military event can be presented in one of three ways – as a defensive necessity, as aggressive action, or as a humanitarian catastrophe – depending on the words used and the sources cited by any given reporter or news outlet.

The study has been extended to social media by an increasing number of scholars. KhosraviNik's research in social media critical discourse studies argues that user-generated and platform-mediated discourse needs analytical tools that not only treat user-generated texts as static but also account for virality, algorithmic curation, and multimodality. This is supported by recent empirical work:

A cross-platform study of the Israel-Hamas conflict was conducted in 2026, which simultaneously analyzed sentiment and dominant topics across multiple social platforms and identified meaningful differences between platforms in their event dynamics, sentiment distribution, and dominant topics, highlighting that the choice of platform is also a variable to consider in conflict discourse research, not a background condition (Antonakaki & Ioannidis, 2026).

A growing body of research on the evolution of media framing in digital environments has signaled a drift away from a textual approach to framing toward one that treats the digital environment as part of framing rather than an additive component (Saidi, 2026).

This convergence is not without gaps, however. Even with this convergence, three gaps remain.

First, most cross-platform studies of conflict discourse to date have focused on the conflict between Israel and Hamas and between Russia and Ukraine, whereas the U.S.-Iran conflict remains relatively under-researched. Second, the fine-grained strategy typology developed by DHA (nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, intensification/mitigation) is seldom used systematically across platforms with varying affordances in the same study. Third, scholarly products from South Asian and Muslim-majority-region researchers are less extensive on conflict framing with Iran than the work of other Western researchers, and the imbalances are evident in the impact of such framing on the public in the region.

This paper addresses these gaps by combining DHA with platform affordance theory in a cross-platform design focused specifically on U.S.-Iran conflict discourse.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is based on two theoretical strands. The first is the Discourse-Historical Approach, selected for its ability to shift analysis from the text level to a multi-layered approach that links micro-level textual devices to macro-level socio-political context. The analysis in Section 5 is organized around the five DHA strategies: Actors named and how (nomination); Qualities attributed and motives given (predication); Justifications offered for actions taken or claims made (argumentation); Whose view is presented as neutral or authoritative (perspectivization); How a claim is amplified or made less (intensification/mitigation).

The second strand is the platform affordance theory, which suggests that the technology of a platform (such as character limits, algorithmic ranking, video length, and defaults of audiences being visible to others) does not simply allow discourse to happen but also enables certain discursive strategies to be adopted and others to be hindered. Just as in other argumentation, the same underlying claim will be expressed in different ways in different contexts – e.g., intensification and perspectivization will be available in the shorter format of TikTok. In comparison, argumentation and elaborated predication will be more available in the longer format of a YouTube explainer. When read together, the two theories of reading enable us not only to ask what is being said on a platform, but also why the platform's format makes that claim-making the easiest way to go.

4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, documentary case-study approach suitable for exploratory discourse-historical research in an active, dynamic conflict. The corpus is not scraped from individual social media posts, which would impose restrictions on data access, platform API, and research ethics for an independent researcher. Instead, it consists of publicly confirmed, cross-referenced conflict-communication events provided by wire feeds and established news organizations that covered the conflict from February to September 2026, including: officially posted statements on social media platforms by named public actors, social media platform moderation actions, and documented viral phenomena. This method aligns with critical discourse research on digital conflict communication practice, where claim reliability is based on cross-source verification rather than direct data scraping.

Table 1 summarizes the documented cases forming the corpus, organized by platform and discursive function.

Platform	Case	Date	Source
X	CENTCOM official statement on Hormuz strikes	Aug 31, 2026	NBC News
X	Sen. Schumer's public rebuke of Trump's Iran rhetoric	Apr 2026	Al Jazeera
X / cross-platform	Iranian FM spokesperson Baghaei's statements on U.S.-Israeli strikes and platform bans	Mar-Apr 2026	Al Jazeera; ScheerPost/Common Dreams
TikTok	White House "hype video" memes splicing pop-culture and strike footage	Mar 20, 2026	BBC World Service (What in the World)
TikTok	Iranian AI-generated propaganda videos targeting Trump	Mar 28, 2026	NPR/WHQR
TikTok	Fact-checked misinformation clips (Arma 3 footage, recycled 2024 missile footage, misattributed funeral video)	Mar 2026	FactCrescendo
TikTok	"Silent Dubai aesthetic" synthetic-media trend	Apr 2026	Inflow Network
YouTube	Suspension of "Explosive Media" pro-Iran Lego-animation channel and its cross-platform migration	Apr 15, 2026	Al-Monitor (AFP); ScheerPost/Common Dreams

The five DHA strategies (Section 3): nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation were implemented in a coding matrix that was used to record each case in its entirety based on its primary/visual source, whether archived or original, and in relation to the accompanying visual and audio elements (TikTok, YouTube), as well as reply/quote-post dynamics (X). The coding process occurred in two stages: a descriptive coding phase conducted for each case, followed by a focused coding phase that reconciled labels for each case into the platform-level coding patterns described in Section 5. When the exact wording matters for legal or rhetorical reasons (e.g., the official's public comment), all evidence is paraphrased and cited, except for the precise wording.

Limitations: the corpus reflects the characteristics of a selective, not exhaustive, sample, restricted to reporting in English, and omitting closed or restricted channels such as Telegram that several of the examples in the corpus show as a secondary reporting channel after the content has left more visible channels; this is proposed in Section 6 as a logical extension. As in all DHA scholarship, the analysis is an informed, systematic, and

interpretive reading of verifiable public discourse and does not claim statistical representativeness.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 X: Real-Time Argumentation and Rapid Perspectivization

On X, official and political commentaries on the conflict were grouped into acrobatic, fast, high-authority statements that others recontextualized within minutes of posting. The U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) account cited the Hormuz strikes on August 31 as a "limited, precise action" geared toward a "defensive response" to an "imminent threat," a predication tactic that suggests it was small in scope but yet justifies its defensive legal standing (NBC News, 2026).

Such a characterization of the conflict as a "wanton war of choice" and Trump as an "extremely sick person" on X, a move that was also made by Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, who responded to President Trump's escalatory rhetoric, was an automatic counter-nomination (Al Jazeera, 2026). In parallel, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmaeil Baghaei employed the platform to make "terrorist acts" and "an illegal war" statements about U.S.-Israel actions (Al Jazeera, 2026), and, later, accused YouTube of going to "suppress the truth" once its pro-Iran channel was banned (Scheer Post/Common Dreams, 2026). In each instance, X served less as a venue for developed argumentation and more as a forum for rapid, competing claims of nomination and predication by officially positioned accounts, contested by opposing actors.

5.2 TikTok: Intensification Through Multimodal Compression and Synthetic Media

The same core story themes were reshaped into emotionally driven, synthetic short stories on TikTok. This 'folding' of war into the 'attention economy' was a deliberate strategy. In March 2026, the White House's communications team began encouraging 'hype videos' that overlapped footage from the NFL, SpongeBob SquarePants, and Call of Duty with military strike footage (BBC World Service, 2026). Iran's messaging machine did it the other way around, creating AI-generated videos denigrating President Trump that spread to American audiences in ways traditional state messaging could not (NPR/WHQR, 2026).

The classical DHA style of argumentation was largely superseded by juxtaposition and, more recently, by synthetic fabrication. Independent fact-checks found several viral clips misattributed to the February event in 2026—such as video-game footage from the Arma 3 game, edited to appear as real combat, as well as footage of missiles being fired from an unrelated incident in October 2024, and a funeral video that was actually of another figure, but attributed to Khamenei (FactCrescendo, 2026). Isolate, TikTok's wider feed consumed the issue, not necessarily in argument, but in aesthetic: videos were created by creators from Dubai, featuring eerily "silent" footage that spoke to a regional sense of anxiety, while "transition" videos were generated using AI from content unrelated to the conflict, but close enough to the edge of it (Inflow Network, 2026). All of the cases, considered together, suggest that TikTok's format, which is structured around short video snippets, algorithmically amplified and therefore tends to favor the intensification and perspectivization-by-editing of content, whether synthetic or decontextualized, over sourced argumentation.

5.3 YouTube: Platform Moderation as Discursive Battleground

Relevant videos for the conflict included product elaboration videos that explained and commented on the issue from well-known platforms, as well as an intriguing example of platform moderation itself as a discursive battleground. A collection of pro-Tehran creators known as "Explosive Media" has created hundreds of AI-generated animation videos about the U.S. war effort, like mocking videos made using the Lego toy system, that earned tens of millions of views, and which were terminated on March 27, 2026, for violating YouTube's policies on spam, deceptive practices, and violent content (Al-Monitor/AFP, 2026; Scheer Post/(Common Dreams, 2026).

The ban itself became a second-order discursive event. Iran's Foreign Ministry instead reframed the platform's content-moderation decision to the effect that it was proof of Western hypocrisy and censorship. At the same time, spokesman Baghaei

declared that a country with Pixar, DreamWorks, and Disney had "made an effort to put a lid on an independent animation channel that could challenge the false narrative of the American administration" (Scheer Post/Common Dreams, 2026). This perspectivization strategy makes platform governance itself a character in the conflict. Most importantly, the deletion did not stop the content from circulating: Clicks on the videos continued to accumulate on Instagram, X, and TikTok, which are far less restrictive in their moderation policies than YouTube, and prove empirically that the platform's more stringent approach does not necessarily mean it does not exist at all; rather, it influences where its visibility is recorded (Al-Monitor/AFP, 2026). This direct illustration captures the paper's central finding: platform affordances, including "moderation policy" as a platform affordance, do not simply alter the tone of conflict discourse but also determine which version of the discourse appears on which platform.

5.4 Cross-Platform Comparison

Table 1 summarizes how the five DHA strategies manifested differently across the three platforms, illustrating the paper's central claim: platform affordances do not simply change the tone of conflict discourse; they change which discursive strategies are structurally available.

DHA Strategy	X	TikTok	YouTube
Nomination	High-authority labeling ("limited action" vs. "wanton war")	Visual/synthetic (AI video, juxtaposition)	Channel identity and platform-ban framing
Predication	Short, officially-sourced phrases	Adjective + AI-generated audio/visual	Multi-clause, animation-mediated mockery
Argumentation	Compressed, authority-based assertion	Displaced by juxtaposition/fabrication	Displaced onto moderation-as-censorship claims
Perspectivization	Competing official statements	Aesthetic/algorithmic framing	Cross-platform migration after removal
Intensification/Mitigation	Rhetorical escalation between officials	Music, pacing, synthetic realism	Framing of bans as suppression

6. Conclusion and Implications

This paper has suggested that it is not possible to analyze the digital framing of the 2026 U.S.-Iran war from a single-platform perspective. The application of the Discourse-Historical Approach across X, TikTok, and YouTube, with a documented and cited corpus of verified public statements and platform-moderation events, shows that platform affordances systematically determine which of the five DHA strategies are predominant: high-velocity official nomination and contestation on X, synthetic and juxtaposed intensification on TikTok, and perspectivization through moderation as a battleground on YouTube. The Explosive Media case is as clear as can be: the same propaganda was deleted from one platform by policy, and spread unaltered on three others, so platform governance is not just a background player in the conflict over framing; it is itself a discursive player.

In digital social research, this means two things. First, cross-platform DHAs, grounded in tangible public-record evidence, should become a common methodological accompaniment to large-N computational studies, as the "large-N" approach can obscure the qualitative mechanism underpinning meaning (one of which is the platform's moderation policy). Second, future studies should expand this framework by systematically monitoring content movement across platforms after moderation events and by sampling multilingual Iranian discourse alongside platforms that are not open to traffic but are used as secondary channels for dissemination, as indicated here by cases of Iranian content migration to Telegram.

These platforms will continue to produce the public meaning of the conflict, in real time, in the wake of the U.S.-Iran conflict that is ongoing as of the writing of this paper (as of late August 2026, the conflict has once again escalated to an armed confrontation). This is an educational process and an essential part of informed debate in a current geopolitical crisis.

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