

Research Article

Critical Discourse Analysis of International Media Framing of the Iran–United States Conflict

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Abstract. A single paragraph, maximum 250 words. Abstract content must contain (1) an overview of the object of research, (2) problems, and research objectives, (3) proposed methods, (4) main findings and results and synthesis of main ideas, and (5) conclusions. In recent years, the Iran–United States conflict has not only unfolded within the geopolitical arena but has also been intensively constructed through international media framing that shapes how global audiences understand this reality. In the context of the digital information overflow, media no longer function merely as conveyors of facts; rather, they act as agents that construct meaning, evoke emotions, and shape the social perceptions of audiences. This study aims to analyze how international media framing constructs representations of the Iran–United States conflict and how audiences interpret such discourse within their social experiences. This research adopts a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design. Data were collected through document analysis of 25 news articles from both Western and non-Western media, as well as exploratory interviews with nine participants from academic backgrounds. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach based on Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional model. The findings reveal three main patterns: the construction of threat through media language, moral polarization that produces a dichotomy of “us versus them,” and the negotiation of meaning by audiences, which is reflective and not always linear. These findings indicate that audiences are not entirely passive; rather, they actively interpret and, at times, question media framing. Theoretically, this study extends Critical Discourse Analysis by incorporating the dimension of audience experience into the discursive process. Practically, it underscores the importance of critical media literacy in navigating the complexity of global information and opens avenues for further exploration of the relationship between discourse, power, and social experience.

Keywords: Audience Perception; Critical Discourse Analysis; Ideology and Representation; Iran–United States Conflict; Media Framing.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the conflict between Iran and the United States has not only unfolded within political and military domains but has also been intensively produced and reproduced through international media. For global audiences, including those in developing countries such as Indonesia, the reality of this conflict is more often encountered through mediated narratives rather than direct experience. For instance, a student of international relations may come to understand Iran as a “global threat” or, conversely, as a “victim of Western hegemony,” not through firsthand interaction but through linguistic constructions and representations presented by the media. This illustrates that media function not merely as conveyors of information but as active agents in shaping the social meaning of international conflict. Preliminary observations of international media coverage—such as that of BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera—reveal striking differences in language use, issue emphasis, and actor representation in reporting on the Iran–United States conflict. Exploratory interviews with several consumers of international news (students and lecturers) indicate that their perceptions of Iran and the United States are strongly influenced by the media they consume.

Respondents who predominantly access Western media tend to perceive Iran as a global security threat, whereas those who engage with alternative or non-Western media are more likely to interpret the conflict as a manifestation of global power asymmetry. These initial findings suggest the presence of non-neutral framing processes operating through lexical choices, narrative structures, and rhetorical strategies within media texts.

The urgency of this study is further reinforced by the current global context, in which the Iran–United States conflict continues to evolve through issues such as nuclear programs, economic sanctions, limited military strikes, and narrative contestation in digital media. In an era of information disruption, media framing not only shapes public opinion but also has the potential to influence international policy and the legitimacy of political actions (Norton & Cooley, 2025). Moreover, the rapid development of digital and social media has accelerated the dissemination of ideologically charged discourse, making critical analysis of media language increasingly essential (Rahro et al., 2024).

A number of studies over the past five years have examined media framing and Critical Discourse Analysis in the context of Iran and international relations. For example, Tartory (2020) demonstrates that both Middle Eastern and Western media frequently employ biased representational strategies in framing Iran’s nuclear issue. Nourani et al. (2020) reveal how political discourse in speeches by Donald Trump systematically delegitimizes Iran through persuasive linguistic constructions. Elyas et al. (2023) find that Western media tend to politicize global issues by positioning Iran in a problematic light through specific lexical choices. Meanwhile, Mubarak (2025) and Badad & El-Nawawy (2025) show that media framing in Middle Eastern conflicts often shifts according to geopolitical interests and ideological orientations. Research by Norton and Cooley (2025) further emphasizes that strategic narratives in Iranian and American media reflect an ongoing discursive struggle to shape global opinion. Additionally, studies by Alim et al. (2024) and Kharazmi (2020) indicate that international media framing frequently contains ideological biases that reinforce the dichotomy of “us” versus “them.”

However, most of these studies primarily focus on structural text analysis or general comparisons of framing, without deeply exploring the experiential dimension of readers, the processes of meaning-making, or how discourse is internalized within specific social contexts. Furthermore, research that explicitly integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with audience experience in understanding the Iran–United States conflict remains relatively limited. In other words, there is a gap in the literature concerning how media framing is not only produced but also consumed and interpreted in social life.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze international media framing of the Iran–United States conflict using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The focus of this study includes identifying linguistic strategies, actor representation, and the ideologies embedded in media texts, through a comparison of Western and non-Western media. In addition, this study seeks to understand how such discourse contributes to shaping readers’ social perceptions. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich CDA scholarship by integrating the dimensions of experience and social meaning. Practically, the findings are anticipated to enhance public critical media literacy, particularly in relation to global geopolitical issues.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) design, drawing on Norman Fairclough’s (1995) model. This approach is selected because the study aims to uncover hidden meanings, ideologies, and power relations constructed through language in media texts. CDA enables analysis not only of linguistic structures but also of the broader social context and discursive practices in which these texts are embedded, making it particularly relevant for examining international media framing of the Iran–United States conflict.

The data selection strategy utilizes purposive sampling, taking into account the relevance, credibility, and global influence of media sources. The primary data consist of news articles from international media representing two perspectives: Western media (e.g., CNN, BBC) and non-Western media (e.g., Al Jazeera, Press TV).

The inclusion criteria are as follows: (1) articles that directly address the Iran–United States conflict, (2) those published within the last five years (2020–2025), and (3) those with high visibility (headline news or trending topics). A total of 20–30 articles are analyzed to ensure analytical depth while maintaining a clear research focus.

This study does not focus on a specific geographical location; rather, it examines the global discursive space constructed by international media. Nevertheless, the social context of the research includes global media consumption, particularly among academic audiences who rely on international news as a primary source of information for understanding geopolitical issues.

Data collection is conducted through document analysis of online news texts. The procedures include: (1) identifying and selecting articles using keywords such as *Iran–US conflict*, *Iran nuclear issue*, and *US sanctions on Iran*; (2) downloading and archiving the news texts; and (3) conducting initial coding of key elements such as headlines, leads, lexical choices, metaphors, and actor representation. In addition, to enrich the interpretive context, limited exploratory interviews are conducted with several news readers (students and lecturers) to understand how these texts are interpreted in social practice. The instruments used include a text analysis guide, field notes, and digital tools for data management.

Data analysis is carried out using Fairclough’s CDA model, which comprises three main stages. The first stage, text analysis (description), examines linguistic aspects such as diction, metaphor, sentence structure, and rhetorical strategies. The second stage, discursive practice analysis (interpretation), explores the processes of text production and consumption, including how media frame reality. The third stage, social practice analysis (explanation), connects the findings to broader social, political, and ideological contexts. The analytical process is conducted systematically through open coding, category development, and the identification of major themes. To enhance analytical rigor, NVivo software is utilized to organize data, group codes, and visualize discourse patterns.

The trustworthiness of the data is ensured through several strategies. Credibility is achieved through triangulation of sources (multiple international media) and methods (document analysis and interviews). Transferability is strengthened by providing detailed contextual descriptions to enable the applicability of findings in other contexts. Dependability is maintained through systematic documentation of the entire research process, while confirmability is ensured by grounding interpretations in traceable empirical evidence.

From an ethical perspective, all interview participants are provided with informed consent prior to data collection. Participant identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms. Furthermore, media data are used responsibly by properly acknowledging original sources and avoiding any manipulation of textual content. This study is committed to maintaining academic integrity and adhering to ethical principles in qualitative research.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Framework

Understanding international media framing of the Iran–United States conflict requires an approach that does not merely view texts as linguistic products, but as social spaces in which meaning, emotion, and power are continuously negotiated. In this context, the theoretical perspectives employed do not simply explain what discourse is; rather, they elucidate how discourse operates in shaping audience experience and social consciousness.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the Primary Lens

The primary approach in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which conceptualizes language as a social practice embedded within power relations. Recent studies demonstrate that CDA is effective in uncovering how media frame geopolitical conflicts to construct particular forms of legitimacy (Rahimi, 2026, *Discourse & Communication*).

From the perspective of audience experience, CDA helps explain how terms such as “threat” and “security” are not neutral but instead trigger specific emotional responses. Research by Bagudu and Hashim (2026, *Journal of Human Studies*) shows that the framing of the Iran–United States conflict is often employed as a propaganda strategy that requires audience acceptance in order to be effective. This implies that meaning is not only produced but also negotiated.

Framing Theory in Contemporary Perspective

Framing theory explains how media select and emphasize particular aspects of reality. In its contemporary development, framing is understood as a process that deeply shapes social perception. Mubarak (2025, *Media Asia*) demonstrates that American and Iranian media construct opposing narratives to reinforce their respective ideological positions. Meanwhile, Fang and Dong (2026, *Journalism and Media*) emphasize that multimodal framing—combining textual and visual elements—can intensify audiences’ emotional responses. In the context of participants’ experiences, framing influences not only what they think but also how they *feel* about the conflict—whether it is perceived as a threat or as an injustice.

Ideology, Power, and Representation (Contemporary Van Dijk Approach)

The ideological approach emphasizes that discourse is always embedded with particular interests. Recent studies indicate that international media continue to reproduce the “us versus them” dichotomy in global conflicts (Arslan, 2026; Basarati & Kazemian, 2026). For example, Arslan (2026) demonstrates how lexical framing can generate ideological bias that shapes audience perception. In social experience, this is reflected when readers unconsciously position one actor as “right” and another as a “threat.”

Propaganda Theory and Discursive Legitimization

In the contemporary context, propaganda is no longer overt but operates subtly through language and framing. Banikalef et al. (2025) show that threat framing is frequently used to justify specific political actions. This is further supported by Jasim and Hussein (2025), who find that discourses of diplomacy and conflict are often constructed to shape international opinion. In audience experience, this may manifest as a sense that certain actions are “reasonable” or “inevitable,” even though they are in fact products of discursive construction.

Audience Theory and Meaning Negotiation

Recent developments in media studies position audiences as active agents. Gholami and Taghizadeh (2026) argue that media framing provides only an initial framework, while final meaning is constructed through audience interpretation. Similarly, Abolhasani (2025) emphasizes that international media representations are produced for global audiences but are not always received uniformly. In the context of this study, participants’ experiences indicate that they often compare multiple media sources, question dominant narratives, and construct their own understanding.

Comparison of Theoretical Approaches

CDA, framing theory, and audience theory have distinct yet complementary focuses. CDA emphasizes the relationship between language and power, framing theory concentrates on the structure of media narratives, and audience theory highlights interpretative processes. However, CDA is selected as the primary analytical lens because of its capacity to integrate these perspectives by simultaneously connecting text, ideology, and social experience. Framing and audience theory are employed as supporting perspectives to enrich the analysis.

This study is grounded in the assumption that the reality of the Iran–United States conflict is a discursive construction that is never neutral. Media are conceptualized as actors that produce meaning through framing, while audiences are viewed as subjects who interpret and negotiate that meaning. Within this framework, data are not treated as objective facts but as:

- a) Representations of ideology within texts,
- b) Reflections of global power relations, and
- c) Socially constructed experiences interpreted subjectively.

For example, when a participant reports feeling “fear” after reading a particular news article, this experience is not understood merely as an individual reaction but as the result of an interaction between media language and the participant’s social context.

Accordingly, this study positions analysis as an effort to understand how meaning is produced by media, how such meaning is internalized or resisted, and how audience experience becomes an integral part of the discursive process itself. This approach enables a deeper reading not only of texts but also of the social realities shaped by those texts.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of international media texts, combined with exploratory interviews with news readers, reveals that the framing of the Iran–United States conflict does not merely shape information but also constructs emotional experiences, cognitive dilemmas, and the ways individuals interpret global reality. Through the processes of coding and interpretation, three interrelated themes emerged, collectively forming the experiential landscape of the participants.

Tabel 1. Summary of Themes.

Main Theme	Subthemes	Core Meaning
Construction of Threat	Language of fear, legitimization of conflict	Media construct a sense of fear
“Us vs Them” Polarization	Identity, morality	The conflict is perceived in binary terms
Audience Meaning Negotiation	Doubt, resistance	Audiences are not entirely passive

Theme 1: The Construction of Threat as a Lived Reality

Across many Western media texts, the Iran–United States conflict is consistently framed through narratives of threat, often articulated through terms such as “nuclear threat,” “aggression,” and “security risk.” These narratives extend beyond textual representation and manifest as emotional experiences among readers.

One participant (P3), an international relations student, described their response as follows: “

When I read news from Western media, it feels like Iran is always dangerous... even before I fully understand the details, there is already a sense of anxiety.”

This experience suggests that media language operates affectively, generating fear that often precedes rational understanding. However, several participants also recognized recurring narrative patterns. Participant P7 noted:

“Sometimes I feel the narrative is always the same... Iran is consistently portrayed negatively. So I begin to question whether this is reality or framing.” This illustrates a tension between accepting information as truth and questioning it as a constructed narrative. Thus, the notion of “threat” emerges not merely as an objective fact but as an experience discursively produced through media language.

Theme 2: Moral Polarization and the “Us vs Them” Dichotomy

Textual analysis reveals a strong tendency among media outlets to construct binary oppositions, portraying the United States as rational or defensive and Iran as aggressive, or vice versa depending on the media’s ideological orientation. This polarization is reflected in participants’ experiences, often manifesting as moral dilemmas. Participant P1, a lecturer, explained:

“When I read CNN, the United States appears to be maintaining stability. But in Al Jazeera, it is the United States that seems dominant and oppressive.”

This statement illustrates how a single individual can experience two conflicting realities depending on the media source, resulting in ambiguity that is difficult to resolve. Meanwhile, Participant P5 expressed a more emotional reflection:

“I become confused... who is actually right? Sometimes it feels like I am being forced to choose a side.”

These responses indicate that media framing not only shapes opinion but also generates social pressure to adopt particular positions. The “us versus them” polarization is not always accepted uncritically but is frequently negotiated internally by audiences.

Theme 3: Negotiation of Meaning and Audience Resistance

Although media possess significant power in shaping discourse, the findings demonstrate that audiences are not entirely passive. Many participants actively compare sources, question narratives, and even resist certain forms of framing. Participant P9 stated:

“I usually read several media sources at once... because relying on just one source does not feel sufficient to understand the situation.” However, this process does not necessarily produce certainty; rather, it often intensifies confusion.

Participant P2 remarked: “*The more I read, the more I realize that nothing is truly neutral.*” This reveals a paradox in which efforts to seek truth instead highlight complexity and uncertainty. Audiences remain in a continuous process of negotiating meaning without ever reaching complete certainty. Interestingly, several participants began to develop critical awareness of media language.

Participant P6 noted: “*Now I pay more attention to the words being used... because that’s where the actual ‘message’ is hidden.*” These findings suggest that media consumption is not merely an act of information intake but a reflective process involving awareness, doubt, and even resistance.

Interrelation of Themes

The three themes are dynamically interconnected. The construction of threat (Theme 1) often serves as the foundation for moral polarization (Theme 2), which is subsequently negotiated by audiences (Theme 3). This process forms a cyclical experience in which individuals continuously move between accepting, questioning, and reinterpreting the realities presented by the media.

Rather than producing a singular conclusion, these findings highlight the complexity of audience experience in engaging with global discourse. The reality of the Iran–United States conflict does not emerge as fixed or definitive; instead, it exists as a contested space of meaning, continuously negotiated both within media texts and within the minds of their readers.

This study reveals three principal findings: (1) media framing constructs a sense of threat that is experienced emotionally, (2) media reproduce moral polarization in the form of a “us versus them” dichotomy, and (3) audiences actively engage in negotiating the meanings of the discourse they consume. These findings do not operate in isolation; rather, they constitute a dynamic social process in which media language functions as a primary medium for constructing meaning while simultaneously being contested through audience experience.

Construction of Threat: From Language to Social Emotion

The first finding demonstrates that media framing operates not only at the cognitive level but also at the affective level, generating feelings of fear, vigilance, and even suspicion toward particular actors. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this underscores the performative power of language: it does not merely represent reality but actively constructs social reality.

This result aligns with the study by Rahimi (2026, *Discourse & Communication*), which shows that argumentative structures in conflict discourse are systematically designed to establish particular forms of legitimacy and influence audience perception. Similarly, Fang and Dong (2026, *Journalism and Media*) find that multimodal framing in media can intensify public emotions through the integration of textual and visual elements.

However, this study extends prior research by demonstrating that such effects are not linear. Audiences do not always accept the constructed sense of “threat” as an absolute truth; instead, they experience ambiguity oscillating between belief and skepticism. This constitutes a key contribution of the present study, shifting the understanding of media effects from a deterministic model toward a more fluid and reflective experiential process.

Moral Polarization: Identity Construction and Ethical Dilemmas

The second theme illustrates how media construct strong binary oppositions, which, within Van Dijk’s framework, can be understood as an ideological strategy of “ingroup versus outgroup.” This polarization not only shapes opinions but also contributes to the formation of audiences’ moral identities.

These findings are consistent with Mubarak (2025, *Media Asia*), who demonstrates that American and Iranian media employ contrasting framing strategies to reinforce their respective ideological positions. In addition, Basarati and Kazemian (2026, *International Review of Pragmatics*) show that metaphorical constructions in Iranian political discourse function to legitimize particular groups.

Unlike these studies, which primarily focus on textual analysis, the present research highlights how such polarization is experienced as an internal moral dilemma by audiences. Participants are not merely “exposed” to ideological constructs; rather, they grapple with ethical questions: Who is right? Should one take a side? In this context, polarization does not necessarily lead to ideological compliance; instead, it opens a space for critical reflection.

This suggests that social identities shaped by media are inherently unstable and continuously subject to negotiation.

Negotiation of Meaning: Audiences as Reflective Subjects

The third finding reinforces the notion that audiences are not passive entities but active agents in interpreting discourse. From the perspective of contemporary audience theory, this indicates that media consumption is a complex interpretative process.

This finding aligns with Gholami and Taghizadeh (2026), who argue that media framing merely provides an “initial framework,” while ultimate meaning is constructed through audience interpretation. Similarly, Abolhasani (2025) demonstrates that representations in international media are consistently negotiated by audiences within their specific social contexts.

However, this study reveals an intriguing paradox: the greater the volume of information accessed, the higher the level of uncertainty experienced. Rather than achieving clarity, audiences become increasingly aware of the complexity of reality. In this sense, the negotiation of meaning is not merely a cognitive process of understanding but also an existential experience in which individuals recognize the limitations of knowledge and the inherent biases embedded in every narrative they encounter.

Integration of Findings: Discourse as a Site of Meaning Contestation

Conceptually, the three themes indicate that media framing operates as a three-layered process: (1) the production of meaning by media through language and framing; (2) the reproduction of ideology through social polarization; and (3) the negotiation of meaning by audiences in their everyday experiences.

These findings reinforce the position of CDA as the primary analytical lens, as it enables the simultaneous examination of text, power, and social experience. Moreover, this study enriches CDA by incorporating the dimension of audience experience, which has received relatively limited attention in previous research (Jaber & Levidze, 2025).

5. Researcher Reflexivity

Throughout the analytical process, the researcher’s position as a member of society who also consumes international media cannot be entirely detached. The researcher’s socio-cultural background influences sensitivity to particular forms of media bias, especially in interpreting global power relations.

Furthermore, the participants—most of whom come from academic environments—demonstrate relatively high levels of critical literacy. This may have influenced the findings, particularly in terms of resistance to media framing. In other words, the audience experiences observed in this study cannot be separated from their social context as educated individuals.

Theoretical and Social Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study:

- a) Extends Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by incorporating the dimension of audience experience,
- b) Demonstrates that framing is not deterministic but involves negotiated meaning, and
- c) Proposes that discourse should be understood as a site of tension rather than a fixed structure.

From a practical perspective, this study:

- a) Promotes the development of critical media literacy,
- b) Helps readers recognize that news does not constitute objective reality, and
- c) Opens a space for reflection on bias in the consumption of global information.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that international media framing of the Iran–United States conflict does not merely present information but constructs a complex social reality through three primary patterns: the construction of threat, moral polarization, and audience meaning negotiation. The media portray the conflict through narratives that are deeply infused with emotion and ideology, while audiences do not simply receive these narratives; rather, they question, reinterpret, and even negotiate their meanings within their everyday experiences.

From these findings emerges the understanding that the reality of global conflict is not a singular, objective entity, but rather the result of dynamic interactions between discourse production and social interpretation.

Participants' experiences reveal that media consumption is a reflective process often characterized by ambiguity, in which trust and doubt coexist simultaneously. Accordingly, this study offers the perspective that media power is not absolute but operates within an open space of negotiated meaning.

Conceptually, this study extends the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach by positioning audiences as integral components of the discursive process rather than merely passive recipients. These findings enrich previous studies that have predominantly focused on textual analysis by demonstrating that discursive meaning is also shaped through individual experience, social background, and reflective engagement (Gholami & Taghizadeh, 2026; Mubarak, 2025). In this regard, the study contributes to the development of a perspective that views discourse as an arena of interaction among language, power, and social experience.

Practically, these findings carry several important implications. For policymakers, the results underscore the necessity of more transparent and non-manipulative public communication strategies, particularly in addressing sensitive geopolitical issues. In the educational context, especially in curriculum development, this study advocates for the integration of critical media literacy to enable learners to engage with news reflectively and avoid being constrained by biased framing. Meanwhile, in the broader social domain, these findings are relevant for enhancing public awareness of how global information can influence perception, emotion, and intergroup relations.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The participants involved were predominantly from academic environments and therefore possessed relatively high levels of critical literacy. This may have influenced the patterns of interpretation observed and may not fully represent the general population. Additionally, the study's focus on specific media texts and a defined time frame limits the generalizability of the findings. The depth of exploration regarding participants' experiences could also be expanded through longer engagement and more diverse social contexts.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to: (1) involve participants from more diverse social backgrounds, including non-academic groups; (2) integrate alternative methodological approaches such as digital ethnography or multimodal analysis to capture the visual and interactive dimensions of media; and (3) expand the scope of investigation to other global conflicts in order to examine framing patterns and audience experiences comparatively. Further exploration of the emotional and psychological dimensions of media consumption also remains an important area for future inquiry.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that understanding global conflict requires more than simply reading news; it necessitates critical awareness of how reality is constructed. In a world saturated with information flows, the ability to question, reflect upon, and reinterpret discourse becomes an essential component of social literacy that is increasingly relevant in contemporary society.

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