

Hashtag Wars: Analysing “Digital Woyane” and “Digital Media Army” During the War on Tigray

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Abstract

The Ethiopian government declared war on Tigray (2020–2022) amid the country’s ethno-polarised political landscape and state-imposed communications shutdown, emphasising the strategic importance of Twitter (now X) for narrative control, mobilisation, and international influence. This study examines the hashtag campaigns of the pro-Tigray Digital Woyane and the Ethiopian government-aligned Digital Media Army. It conceptualises hashtag activism as a form of information warfare in which strategic narratives seek to establish legitimacy, mobilise supporters, and delegitimise adversaries. Guided by social identity theory, this study employed a mixed-methods design involving quantitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis of tweets and hashtags, supplemented by manual screenshot collection ($n = 500$). The findings show that Digital Woyane (252 tweets) primarily highlighted civilian suffering through narratives of atrocities, hunger, humanitarian crises (including the killing of Médecins Sans Frontières staff), and appeals to international institutions before progressively shifting towards themes of resistance. In contrast, the Digital Media Army (248 tweets) emphasised sovereignty, national unity, and denial narratives while systematically delegitimising and discrediting international media and reports of human rights violations. Overall, the hashtag campaigns functioned as a form of information warfare, facilitating transnational advocacy while simultaneously amplifying propaganda and competing narratives on X. This study contributes to our understanding of how X shapes conflict narratives, amplifies selective information, and reinforces information warfare in contemporary armed conflicts.

Keywords

Digital Media Army; Digital Woyane; Ethiopia; hashtag activism; hashtag wars; war on Tigray; X

1. Introduction

On 4 November 2020, the Ethiopian government declared war on Tigray (2020–2022) after months of escalating tensions with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The Ethiopian government prominently highlighted the attack on the “Northern Command” as a key narrative of the war, aiming to rally Ethiopians against Tigray and to influence the international community. Nevertheless, evidence shows that it undertook preparations in advance and established military coordination with Eritrea (Bearak, 2021; van Reisen, 2021; Walsh, 2021). This shows that the war on Tigray involved both internal and external forces. Internal forces included the Ethiopian National Defense Force and regional militias from different regions in the country. Although the Ethiopian government persistently denied the involvement of foreign forces, evidence indicates that both Eritrean and Somali forces actively participated in the war (Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022; Rubin, 2021). Alongside the Ethiopian National Defense Force, Eritrean troops operated in different parts of Tigray and were widely accused of committing serious violations of international humanitarian law, including extrajudicial killings, widespread sexual violence, and deliberate attacks on civilians (Human Rights Watch & Amnesty International, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2021).

With close to a million people killed within two years, the war on Tigray is considered the deadliest armed conflict of the 21st century (Freedman, 2024; van Niekerk, 2021). Based on this, we used the term “war on Tigray” as it perfectly describes the scale, intensity, and nature of civilian hostilities. The war has had enduring consequences for Ethiopia. Following the defeat of the Ethiopian military and its allied forces in June 2021, the war expanded into the neighbouring Afar and Amhara regions, with humanitarian and security implications. While recognising the broader implications of the war, this study focuses only on Tigray.

The Ethiopian government described the war as a “law enforcement operation” and declared a communications shutdown to conceal atrocities and control narratives (Nigussie & Kiflu, 2024). This represents a violation of human rights during conflicts and profoundly affects individuals and communities (Ayalew & Redae, 2025). During the war on Tigray, the warring parties generated competing narratives and talking points, reflecting the strategic use of X to shape the interpretation of the war. Strategic narratives, rooted in political communication and international relations, describe how political actors construct and disseminate narratives to “shape domestic and international perceptions, interpretations, and actions” (Miskimmon et al., 2012, p. 3). Digital technologies have expanded the scope of war participation (McDonald, 2025). Contemporary warfare has transformed conflict reporting as digital connectivity has turned war zones into networked spaces, diminishing the traditional roles of journalists as primary sources and troop companions. Specifically, access to smartphones and social media has enabled citizens to capture and disseminate real-time information to local, remote, and global audiences, thereby influencing wartime narratives (Nigussie & Kiflu, 2024). In such cases, warring parties seek to control communication and influence their allies, adversaries, and international communities. Despite a state-declared communications blackout on Tigray throughout the war, digital warfare played a significant and evolving role (Nigussie & Kiflu, 2025).

This study examines two opposing digital entities during the war: the Digital Media Army, involving Ethiopian leaders, elites, and foreign forces, including Eritreans, using X to promote the Ethiopian government's narratives; and Digital Woyane, representing pro-Tigray activists and diaspora networks that exposed human rights abuse, documented violence, and challenged state-sponsored propaganda. Related

studies have also explored the existence of competing narratives across different camps during the war (Ayalew & Ayalew, 2024; Wilmot et al., 2021). Despite studies on hashtag activism in conflict settings (Allen, 2025; Ayalew & Ayalew, 2024; Hamelberg et al., 2024; Wilmot et al., 2021), few have explored how digital actors represent wartime digital activism to shape narratives in contested spaces. Most importantly, it overlooks the role of digital entities in influencing public perception and discourse. This study fills this gap by analysing competing narratives from Digital Woyane and the Digital Media Army, focusing on the following research questions:

RQ1: How did the Digital Woyane and Digital Media Army cover the war on Tigray?

RQ2: What were the dominant narratives and themes used by the two digital actors?

This study covers November 2020 to November 2022, the outbreak of the war, and the Pretoria Agreement, which formally established the cessation of hostilities between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF. It recognises that digital activism is intertwined with campaigns for political legitimacy, information control, and narrative dominance. This study advances our understanding of hashtag activism in contemporary conflicts by elucidating how X functions as a site of information warfare and strategic communication, where competing actors construct, circulate, and contest war narratives to influence domestic and international audiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Media in Contemporary Conflicts

Digital media shape contemporary conflicts by enabling the production and circulation of information, propaganda, and competing narratives. They allow state and non-state actors to influence public perceptions, engage international audiences, and contest political legitimacy beyond the battlefield (Cherry, 2024; Oakley & Rogg, 2024). Digital media amplify conflict-related content, allowing news organisations and political actors to frame wars and influence public opinion, policy preferences, and international responses (Muddiman & Scacco, 2024). Contemporary conflicts are struggles over narrative dominance in digital spaces, where actors use communication to shape perceptions, mobilise support, construct legitimacy, and influence international responses, making information increasingly consequential in the context of military operations. X has become a major battlefield in information warfare. Its open, real-time, and interactive architecture enables the dissemination, amplification, and contestation of strategic narratives that shape public opinion, political discourse, and audience mobilisation during conflict (Jensen & Ramjee, 2023; Naranjo-Vinueza et al., 2025). This immediacy has transformed X into an important source of situational awareness for policymakers, researchers, and the public (Newman et al., 2026). During the Russia–Ukraine war, state and grassroots actors employed memes to counter disinformation, mobilise civic resistance, sustain international support, and maintain global attention (Munk, 2025). The Israel–Hamas conflict demonstrated X’s role as a platform and strategic arena for information warfare, public diplomacy, and opinion formation (Jensen & Ramjee, 2023).

Different studies have examined X in relation to the war on Tigray (Ayalew & Ayalew, 2024; Kebede & Pohjonen, 2025; Orgeret et al., 2026; Wilmot et al., 2021). However, few studies have examined hashtag

activism as a form of information warfare through which strategic narratives are deployed to legitimise political positions, mobilise supporters, and delegitimise adversaries. As digitally mediated political communication, hashtag activism can consolidate support among audiences while challenging opposing viewpoints and competing narratives, revealing the relationship between communication strategies and power in digital spaces. Hashtag activism extends beyond the expression of political opinions; it functions as a strategic communicative practice in which actors compete to shape meaning, influence audiences, and establish narrative dominance in contemporary conflicts.

2.2. Digital Activism

Digital activism uses digital tools, especially social media and internet technologies, to drive social or political change. In Ethiopia, it encompasses the activities of diaspora and domestic activists who use digital platforms to participate in political discourse, mobilise audiences, circulate alternative narratives, and contest dominant representations of political events. Diaspora-based online media are particularly important in Ethiopia's transnational media environment. Operating across national boundaries, these outlets often adopt forms of activist journalism in which editors and contributors critically scrutinise government policies, challenge official narratives, and amplify perspectives that may be marginalised by domestic media. Some editors view this as conflicting with classical journalism norms but justify it due to Ethiopia's political conditions, seeing the fusion of activism with journalism as a progressive evolution (Skjerdal, 2011). Ethiopian digital activists raise political awareness through persistent online activism, especially where traditional media are constrained, highlighting the importance of digital platforms for political expression in Ethiopia's complex landscape (Saka & Ojo, 2024).

Hashtags are useful for aggregating discussions, expressing solidarity, amplifying voices, and keeping movements visible in the public discourse (Simpson, 2018). They facilitate connectivity and collective meaning-making, which is central to social movements, especially in conflicted or contested political environments (Dobrin, 2020). Hashtags are crucial for mobilisation, coordination, and narrative alignment in digital activism (Bruns & Burgess, 2015), and they can trigger mass participation quickly, while livestreaming and forums build collective identities across borders (Cheng et al., 2024; Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022). However, evidence shows that X remains a contested space where participants use hashtag campaigns, emotional framing, and networked communication to influence audiences, especially during conflicts (Schneiker et al., 2019).

Platforms such as X foster more public engagement than brand messages during conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war (Hamelberg et al., 2024). In Somalia, despite low internet penetration, digital technologies significantly influence the activities of al-Shabaab, who use online platforms for recruitment, propaganda, and fundraising, especially among the Somali diaspora (Allen, 2025). In conflict-affected political landscapes, hashtag activism is deeply intertwined with attempts to manipulate public opinion and sustain government legitimacy (Chagas et al., 2022).

2.3. *Digital Woyane vs. Digital Media Army: Digital Warfare for Narrative Dominance?*

2.3.1. Digital Woyane

Digital Woyane represents a pro-Tigray digital activist network involving local actors and diaspora communities that use social media to amplify narratives about the political and humanitarian conditions in Tigray. Its activities include raising awareness, mobilising support, circulating news and personal testimonies, and advocating for greater international attention to the conflict. Rather than operating solely through formal organisational structures, the network relies heavily on individual users and distributed digital participation to challenge mainstream media representations and disseminate alternative accounts of events. Digital Woyane was initially associated with the TPLF. However, following the state-imposed communications blackout in Tigray, digital activities involved local and diaspora actors using social media to maintain visibility and coordinate advocacy. In this sense, Digital Woyane illustrates how war-related movements can adapt through digital networks, transforming established political struggles into transnational forms of communication, mobilisation, and narrative contestation.

Digital Woyane activists assert political narratives, challenge dominant discourses, and mobilise supporters using videos, social media, and digital archives about the war on Tigray. This mirrors trends in which marginalised groups use digital spaces to resist repression and shape visibility, often amid state censorship and violence. Digital Woyane benefits from the capacity of digital media to facilitate connective action, document experiences, and build community ties by bridging offline protests with the digital world. Studies show that online activism often correlates with offline activism, where social media posts can catalyse or support street mobilisation and political discourse (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

2.3.2. Digital Media Army

In post-2018 Ethiopia, the ruling Prosperity Party established a digital media wing called the Digital Media Army. The Digital Media Army functions as a political faction in which political figures and their elite associates operate, often under anonymous identities and with multiple accounts. These efforts aim to shape public opinion, discredit opposing voices, and maintain control over narratives in digital spaces. The group includes not only Ethiopian nationals but also external allies, such as Eritreans, who coordinate campaigns to influence and discredit public opinion and counter opposing narratives online.

Individuals working for the Digital Media Army receive directives from Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and are supervised by the Prime Minister's Social Advisor Daniel Kibret. The Digital Media Army employs various tactics, including creating and disseminating propaganda, engaging in online debates, and flooding social media platforms with pro-government content. By leveraging the power of social media and online platforms, the Digital Media Army can quickly respond to emerging issues and effectively influence public discourse on a large scale. A BBC investigative report indicates that the “media army” was involved in disinformation and misleading Facebook campaigns (“Yebiltsgna parti ‘yemidiya serawit,’” 2024), which incited hate speech across social media platforms to amplify divisive messages targeting specific ethnic groups.

3. An Overview of the Socio-Political Context of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of Africa's most diverse countries with over 80 ethnic groups. This diversity has shaped the country's historical development, national identity, and political organisation. It also contributes to challenges in political representation, access to resources, territorial claims, and regional autonomy. Ethiopia adopted ethnic federalism, granting self-governance to ethnically defined regional states (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995). While this has enhanced the recognition of ethnic identities and expanded opportunities for regional self-governance, it has also been associated with increased ethnic political competition, intercommunal conflict, and ongoing governance challenges (Asmare, 2024; Freedom House, n.d.; Jibat et al., 2024). These dynamics have complicated efforts to establish a stable governance system in the country. In particular, the politicisation of ethnic identities has, at times, reinforced exclusionary political practices, intensified inter-ethnic tensions, and constrained inclusive dialogue among communities (Freedom House, n.d.). Unresolved historical grievances, competing nationalist narratives, and weak conflict resolution institutions continue to undermine national cohesion and sustainable peace in Ethiopia (Asmare, 2024; US Department of State, 2025). Ethiopia continues to face conflict between the federal government and regional actors over constitutional authority, security governance, and the future of the ethnic federal system, undermining political stability and democratic consolidation (Freedom House, n.d.; US Department of State, 2025).

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) explains how self-concepts stem from social group membership (Tajfel, 1979). Self-concept includes personal and social identity, which is defined by group affiliations such as ethnicity or nationality (Hogg et al., 2017). SIT provides a framework for understanding how people categorise themselves and others into distinct groups, such as in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination, as mechanisms for maintaining a positive social identity. Tajfel and Turner (1979) highlighted that identifying with a group divides the world into a liked in-group and a disliked out-group. This explains the mental processes and societal factors within group interactions, including prejudice and discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

SIT connects self-concepts to group membership, with its key ideas being social categorisation, identification, and comparison: social categorisation classifies people into groups, providing social order; social identification involves adopting a group's identity, influencing attitudes and behaviours; and social comparison leads individuals to compare in-groups with out-groups for positive distinctiveness and to maintain their self-esteem (Hornsey, 2008). This results in societal divisions, as individuals favour in-groups while discriminating against out-groups to preserve a positive social identity, explaining prejudice and group polarisation. Ethiopia is an ethnically diverse country where the needs and political priorities of different ethnic groups have been unevenly represented and addressed.

SIT is particularly relevant to ethnicity-based political systems because it explains intergroup conflicts rooted in collective identities and resource struggles (Reynolds & Turner, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Digital narratives are influential because they reinforce identity and membership perceptions: Individuals trust,

share, and defend in-group information while rejecting out-group information (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity can predict social media engagement during wartime. Kyrychenko et al. (2024) found that during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, national identification correlated with involvement, information dissemination, and interactions with conflict-related content.

4.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

Alongside SIT, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used as another theoretical framework. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationships between discourse, ideology, and social structures, and how discourse contributes to unequal power relations (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Fairclough (2010) emphasised language as a social practice through which power, ideology, and relations are produced and reproduced. The three-dimensional framework of discourse analysis—description, interpretation, and explanation—links texts to ideologies, power, and social change (Fairclough, 2010). By integrating textual analysis with ideology, power, and social practice, CDA reveals how beliefs, attitudes, identities, and political narratives are communicated, legitimised, and contested in digital and traditional media (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2018; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

5. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative content analysis and CDA. This approach enables the systematic identification of patterns and trends in communication while interpreting how meanings, identities, ideologies, and power relations are constructed and negotiated within conflict discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Fairclough, 2010). Combining these methods captures the interactions and social, political, and linguistic dynamics of the discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Krippendorff, 2019). Purposive sampling selected tweets on the war on Tigray associated with the strategies of Digital Woyane and the Digital Media Army. This approach is appropriate for qualitative social media research because it enables the selection of information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

First, we used quantitative content analysis, a systematic and replicable method for examining patterns in textual data by classifying content into predefined or emergent categories (Neuendorf, 2017). Quantitative content analysis provides statistical insights into the frequency and distribution of key themes, patterns, and categories, enabling systematic examination of large volumes of textual data (Krippendorff, 2019; Neuendorf, 2017). Quantitative content analysis involves coding data into defined categories, which may be established deductively from theoretical frameworks or developed inductively from data during analysis. It employs standardised procedures to ensure objectivity, reliability, and replicability, enabling researchers to transform qualitative information into quantitative data for statistical analysis (Nielbo et al., 2024).

Second, we used CDA to investigate how the language and visual elements of tweets construct meaning, represent social identities, and reproduce ideological positions and power relations. CDA offers a lens through which to examine the underlying ideologies, power relations, and sociopolitical contexts that shape discourse (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Beyond measuring the occurrence of hashtags, CDA examines discourse as a form of social practice, revealing how texts contribute to the production and maintenance of social and political realities (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Regarding data collection, X's search tool facilitated the

manual collection of tweets. Tweets were collected in English, Tigrigna, and Amharic to capture local and global dimensions of hashtag activism. English tweets were prioritised for reach, and Tigrigna and Amharic tweets were translated into English for consistency.

A total of 500 tweets were captured via screenshots, with 252 associated with the Digital Woyane and 248 with the Digital Media Army. Screenshot archiving preserved the original textual content, visual presentation, hashtags, and contextual elements of each tweet. This method is recommended because online content is unstable and may be deleted, modified, or become inaccessible, compromising the transparency and reliability of research (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022). To identify prominent campaign messages, tweets were selected based on their level of public engagement (i.e., likes, shares, and retweets).

Hashtag selection was guided by a thorough review of hashtags consistently used by both parties throughout the war. The Digital Woyane campaign was represented by #TigrayGenocide, #TigrayUnderAttack, #IStandWithTigray, #WarOnTigray, #TigrayWillPrevail, #TigrayCantWait, #EndTigraySiege, #FreeTigray, #SaveTigray, and #StopWarOnTigray. These hashtags included content from TPLF officials, the Tigrayan diaspora, international supporters, and citizens. But the Digital Media Army campaign included #UnityForEthiopia, #TPLFTerrorists, #FakeAxumMassacre, #AmnestyUsedTPLFSources, #HandsOffEthiopia, #NoMore, #RespectEthiopia, #EthiopiaPrevails, #DefendEthiopia, and #SayNoToTPLF. The Digital Media Army consisted of tweets from Ethiopian government institutions, officials, activists, social media users, diaspora groups, and Eritrean government supporters.

6. Data Analysis Procedure

6.1. Quantitative Content Analysis

The quantitative content analysis manually coded 500 purposively selected tweets from Digital Woyane and the Digital Media Army using a coding manual with operational definitions, coding rules, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. Coding considered the tweet text, hashtags, language, contextual references, and broader narrative meanings. The coding manual contained operational definitions for each narrative category, coding rules, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. Tweets emphasising civilian suffering, alleged mass atrocities, or humanitarian appeals were coded as victimhood/humanitarian crisis, whereas tweets portraying opposing actors as threats, criminals, or illegitimate political entities were coded as delegitimisation.

An inductive approach was used from dominant hashtags, with the 10 most frequently used hashtags from each campaign analysed to identify key themes and communicative objectives. Recurring narratives were grouped into categories, including victimhood, resistance, genocide, human rights violations, terrorism, law enforcement, national unity, humanitarian crisis, and delegitimisation. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to compare narrative patterns across the two campaigns. Two independent coders assessed the dataset using the same coding manual, and intercoder reliability was measured using Holsti's (1969) formula, yielding a coefficient above 0.93.

6.2. CDA

Data analysis for CDA combined Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional framework with van Dijk's (2018) socio-cognitive approach. Fairclough's framework examines discourse at the levels of text, discursive

practice, and social practice, focusing on struggles over legitimacy, identity, power, and representation (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Van Dijk (2018) examined how discourse reproduces ideology through social cognition, group identity, and power relations. Based on this, the analysis of Digital Woyane focused on hashtags and visual representations constructing narratives of victimhood, humanitarian suffering, resistance, and collective resilience, framing the conflict as a humanitarian crisis that requires international attention. The Digital Media Army analysis examined narratives of national unity, sovereignty, security, and state legitimacy, including political labelling, claims of foreign interference, and counterterrorism discourse used to delegitimise opponents and reinforce state-centred interpretations of the war.

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1. Digital Woyane and Digital Media Army Coverages of the War on Tigray

Between November 2020 and November 2022, Digital Woyane and the Digital Media Army produced 252 and 248 hashtag tweets, respectively (Tables 1 and 2). Both groups used X to frame the conflict and disseminate narratives about the war; however, they differed in the themes they prioritised. While each sought to shape public discourse and influence audience perceptions, their messaging reflected distinct strategic emphases and communication objectives. Notable differences were observed in the themes of the hashtags promoted by each side.

Table 1. Tweets from Digital Woyane.

No.	Hashtag	No. of Hashtags	Percent
1	#TigrayGenocide	95	37.70%
2	#TigrayUnderAttack	35	14.68%
3	#IStandWithTigray	15	6%
4	#WarOnTigray	10	4%
5	#TigrayWillPrevail	10	4%
6	#TigrayCantWait	30	11.9%
7	#EndTigraySiege	13	5.16%
8	#FreeTigray	9	3.6%
9	#SaveTigray	15	6%
10	#StopWarOnTigray	20	7.9%

Table 1 presents the distribution of hashtags attributed to Digital Woyane between November 2020 and November 2022. A total of 252 tweets were analysed using 10 hashtags. Among them, #TigrayGenocide was the most predominant and frequently used hashtag, appearing in 95 tweets (37.70%), thus making it the most dominant theme. This was followed by #TigrayUnderAttack, which appeared in 35 tweets (14.68%), and #TigrayCantWait, which appeared in 30 tweets (11.9%). Other hashtags included #StopWarOnTigray (20 tweets, 7.9%), #IStandWithTigray and #SaveTigray (15 tweets each, 6%), and #EndTigraySiege (13 tweets, 5.16%). The hashtags #WarOnTigray and #TigrayWillPrevail appeared in 10 tweets (4%) and #FreeTigray appeared in nine tweets (3.6%). This hashtag likely mobilised support by highlighting allegations of mass atrocities. Hashtags such as #TigrayUnderAttack and #TigrayCantWait reinforced the urgency and immediacy of the war, sustaining awareness and exerting pressure for international intervention and

support. Other hashtags, such as #StopWarOnTigray, #IStandWithTigray, and #SaveTigray, reflect advocacy and solidarity, each contributing to a multifaceted communication strategy. The presence of hashtags such as #EndTigraySiege points to specific conflict issues, such as blockades or humanitarian access restrictions, signalling targeted concerns in the broader war discourse. Less frequently used hashtags, including #WarOnTigray, #TigrayWillPrevail, and #FreeTigray, contribute to the narrative by emphasising resistance and hope for eventual victory. Together, this hashtag distribution illustrates a digital campaign that shapes public perception, rallies support, and maintains the visibility of the Tigray cause.

Table 2. Tweets from Digital Media Army.

No	Hashtags	No. of Hashtags	Percent
1	#UnityForEthiopia	27	10.9%
2	#TPLFTerrorists	36	14.5%
3	#FakeAxumMassacre	40	16%
4	#AmnestyUsedTPLFSources	11	4.4%
5	#HandsOffEthiopia	6	2.4%
6	#NoMore	46	18.5%
7	#RespectEthiopia	9	3.6%
8	#EthiopiaPrevails	45	18%
9	#DefendEthiopia	15	6%
10	#SayNoToTPLF	13	5.2%

Table 2 shows the dominant hashtags used by Ethiopian federal government-affiliated digital media actors between November 2020 and November 2022, with 248 tweets being analysed. The most used hashtags were #NoMore (46 tweets, 18.5%), #EthiopiaPrevails (45 tweets, 18%), and #FakeAxumMassacre (40 tweets, 16%). These were followed by #TPLFTerrorists (36 tweets, 14.5%) and #UnityForEthiopia (27 tweets, 10.9%). During the war on Tigray, the least used hashtags were #DefendEthiopia (15 tweets, 6%), #SayNoToTPLF (13 tweets, 5.2%), #AmnestyUsedTPLFSources (11 tweets, 4.4%), #RespectEthiopia (9 tweets, 3.6%), and #HandsOffEthiopia (6 tweets, 2.4%). The dominant themes emphasise national unity, delegitimise opposing groups, and reject international criticism. Hashtags such as #NoMore and #EthiopiaPrevails focus on sovereignty and resilience, whereas #FakeAxumMassacre and #AmnestyUsedTPLFSources aim to discredit human rights violation reports.

The analysis of the hashtags used by the Digital Media Army actors revealed a strategic focus on reinforcing national unity and countering opposing narratives. The predominance of hashtags such as #NoMore, #EthiopiaPrevails, and #FakeAxumMassacre highlights a concerted effort to promote the themes of sovereignty, resilience, and denial of human rights abuse. The Digital Media Army focused on denying and countering allegations of civilian massacres and criticism while promoting pro-government narratives, with messaging patterns showing polarising rhetoric and violence. This aligns with Shifa and Díaz Pabón (2022), who argued that digital media in Ethiopia is increasingly used to incite violence, including calls for the extermination of specific groups. The hashtags serve dual purposes: rallying domestic and international support by emphasising Ethiopia's strength and legitimacy, while simultaneously discrediting reports and sources that challenge the government's position. Conversely, less frequently used hashtags, such as #DefendEthiopia, #SayNoToTPLF, and #AmnestyUsedTPLFSources, although fewer in number, reinforced the delegitimation of the TPLF by framing it as a terrorist group.

7.2. X as a Battlefield for Narrative Control During the War on Tigray

The war on Tigray highlights X hashtags as organisational tools and narrative devices that shape moral and political discourse in conflicts. The differing strategies of the Digital Woyane and Digital Media Army show that hashtag activism works on three levels: narrative construction, audience mobilisation, and opposition delegitimisation. An analysis of key hashtags revealed that these campaigns were not mere political expressions but strategic communication frameworks that contested the interpretations of the war. This aligns with research indicating that conflicting parties manage information to influence public opinion (Miskimmon et al., 2012) and that digital platforms such as X are arenas where hashtag campaigns, emotional framing, and networked communication shape conflict narratives (Schneiker et al., 2019).

7.2.1. Digital Woyane Narrative Construction

The core of Digital Woyane's hashtag strategy was to craft an ethically compelling and universally understandable narrative. This narrative gains legitimacy from themes of civilian suffering, genocide, resistance, and resilience, all within internationally recognised human rights norms. The prominence of #TigrayGenocide as the campaign's leading hashtag is significant beyond its engagement metrics. Its extensive use underscores its crucial role in shaping themes and serving as the primary framework for interpreting realities. By employing the term genocide instead of war, activists aimed to reframe the conflict within a universally recognised moral framework and invoke international legal responsibility for intervention. #TigrayGenocide functioned as a performative instrument that shaped reality by aligning the conflict with extreme violence. This approach transformed the hashtag into what Zhang (2019) describes as a tool of narrative power, distilling a complex political situation into resonant and morally clear messages for global dissemination. Digital Woyane's tweets combine visual evidence of atrocities, civilian death tolls exceeding half a million, and comparisons with the Russia-Ukraine conflict to highlight global double standards and intensify the urgency of the moral issue (see Figure 1).

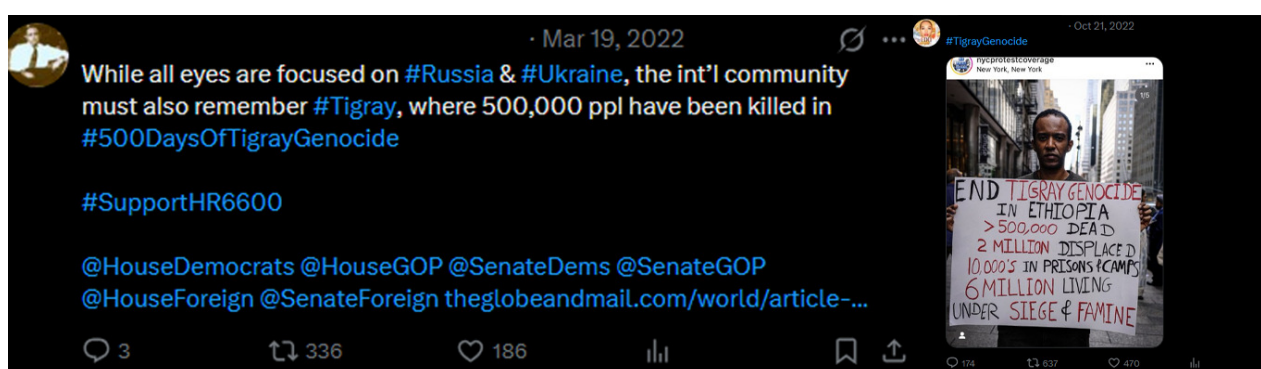


Figure 1. Tweets on humanitarian crisis and calls to end the Tigray siege.

The use of additional hashtags introduced a humanitarian perspective to the campaign's framing strategy. The hashtag #TigrayUnderAttack engaged President Biden, EU officials, and the UN while sharing evidence of the visual distress of civilians. This tactic depicts the lack of international intervention as a moral failure, reinforcing calls for global action. The campaign highlighted the deaths of Médecins Sans Frontières personnel, Maria, Tedros, and Yohannes to emphasise the accusations of atrocities committed by Ethiopian and government-aligned forces in Tigray. These narratives internationalise the conflict by turning local

violence into a global humanitarian accountability discourse. By addressing political figures and organisations, the hashtags create a moral framework in which silence and inaction are equated with complicity. Incorporating humanitarian workers amplifies emotional and ethical resonance by evoking symbols of impartiality and empathy. This strategy has successfully attracted global attention by portraying the civil war as a humanitarian crisis and suggesting that external actors' silence or inaction contributes to the ongoing issue (Kebede & Pohjonen, 2025; Schneiker et al., 2019). This strategy shows how digital activism in conflict zones uses humanitarian narratives to document suffering, pressure external actors to act, and shape geopolitical understanding of war. It calls on the international community to respond to the massacre of civilians and humanitarian workers (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Massacres of civilians, humanitarian workers, and appeals to the international community.

The hashtag #EndTigraySiege juxtaposed images of malnourished children with tags of organisations such as the UN, EU, and UK Parliament, framing the blockade as a deliberate act of collective punishment. Concurrently, #TigrayCantWait referenced UN agencies with direct appeals to Western political leaders, underscoring an urgent need for international intervention. These hashtags embody what Gerbaudo (2024) describes as the “logic of collection,” where individual testimonies and humanitarian signals become a cohesive, politically actionable advocacy demand. This framing converts humanitarian imagery into a coordinated digital advocacy mechanism that unifies moral urgency and political accountability within a singular framework. Invoking authoritative international institutions bolsters the perceived legitimacy of claims while pressuring these entities to respond (Cheng et al., 2024; Gerbaudo, 2024). The campaign enhances awareness by integrating individual instances of suffering into a unified story, transforming humanitarian issues into political action to accelerate interventions.

The hashtags #StandWithTigray and #IStandWithTigray spurred international mobilisation and framed solidarity as an ethical imperative. They used comparative rhetoric between Ukraine and Tigray to highlight the perceived inconsistencies in Western responses, with this discourse being reinforced by references to the killings of Médecins Sans Frontières workers and humanitarian reports. The hashtag #TigrayWillPrevail marks a shift in discourse, moving beyond victimhood to emphasise sovereignty and self-determination. By incorporating symbols such as the Tigray flag, imagery of the Tigray Defense Forces, and photos of

leaders such as Debretsion Gebremichael, the hashtag constructs a narrative of collective resilience. It depicts the Tigray people as actively resisting and overcoming brutality rather than passively awaiting external help. Independence is portrayed not as a mere ideological goal but as a necessary response to systemic oppression. This shows resilience and self-determination as the ultimate goals of the war (see Figure 3). This dual narrative of suffering and resilience sustains mobilisation through emotional urgency and hope, consistent with Greijdanus et al.'s (2020) findings on online engagement.

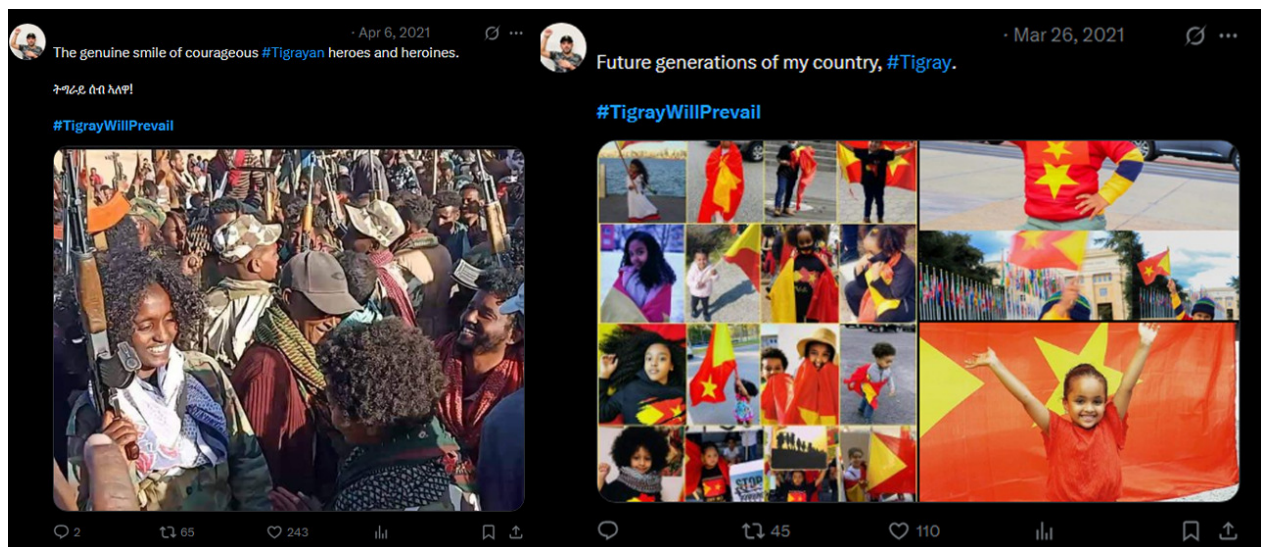


Figure 3. Tweets expressing resilience and asserting self-determination.

The transition from a focus on humanitarian victimhood to an emphasis on assertive sovereignty marks a strategic shift in digital conflict communication. This evolution involves a shift in identity construction from passive acknowledgement of loss to active assertion of political agency. Comparing suffering with resilience sustains emotional intensity, legitimises political aspirations, reinforces engagement, and fosters transnational solidarity (Zhang, 2019).

7.2.2. Digital Media Army's Narrative Focus

The Digital Media Army's counterstrategy had four pillars: fostering national unity, delegitimising the TPLF, denying atrocities, and promoting defensive nationalism. This countered the tactics of the Digital Woyane. Hashtags such as #EthiopiaPrevails and #UnityForEthiopia depicted Ethiopia as cohesive in the face of external threats and boosted domestic solidarity. Simultaneously, hashtags such as #TPLFTerrorists and #SayNoToTPLF portrayed the TPLF as illegitimate, reframed the conflict as counter-terrorism, and constrained the adversary's narrative space. Visuals reinforced these narratives, casting the EU and the US as unwarranted intruders and the TPLF as a threat to Ethiopia's national unity (see Figure 4).

The imagery of the Ethiopian and Eritrean flags in front of UN offices symbolises unity against external pressures. These strategies demonstrate how digital propaganda uses text and visuals to create narratives. By emphasising unity and threats, these narratives justify extreme actions and exclude the TPLF from discussions, thereby reducing the opportunities for negotiation. These elements demonstrate how digital campaigns alter discourse by strengthening state legitimacy and suppressing alternative viewpoints. This is



Figure 4. Tweets promoting national unity and rejecting foreign interference.

consistent with Piazza (2020), who contended that elite-driven hostility portrays outgroups as threats to bolster in-group unity, a process of social categorisation and comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

#FakeAxumMassacre and #AmnestyUsedTPLFSources challenged Amnesty International's credibility, illustrating how disinformation serves as political communication aimed at undermining knowledge authority rather than disputing facts. Freelon and Wells (2020) describe this tactic as disinformation that functions as political messaging. Its goal is to weaken trust in information sources and create a state of widespread uncertainty in which specific claims are difficult to evaluate. #NoMore and #HandsOffEthiopia completed this narrative by reinterpreting international criticism as a violation of sovereignty, delegitimising the normative frameworks that the Digital Woyane used to justify intervention, and portraying international concern as a form of neocolonial interference (see Figure 5).

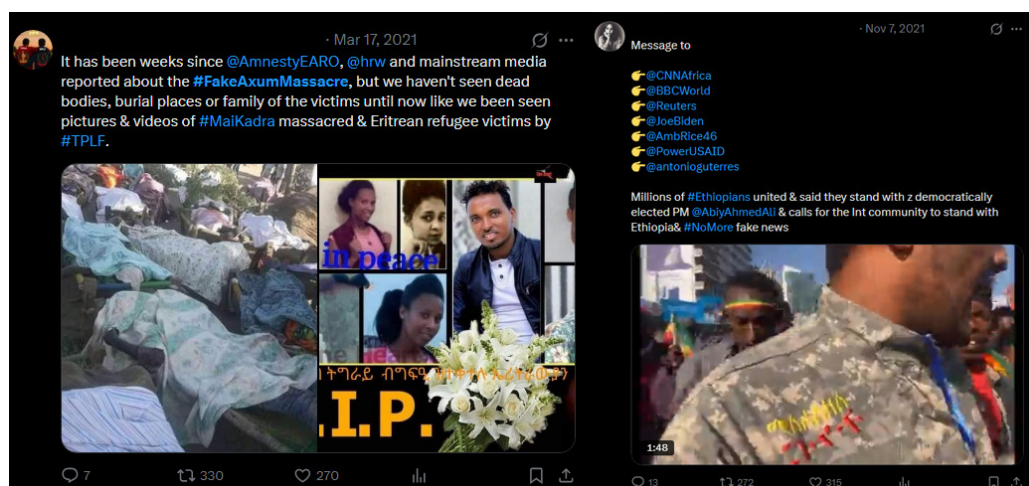


Figure 5. Denial of atrocities and international reports.

The Digital Media Army, in X posts, tagged Amnesty International and shared graphic images of deceased individuals, claiming that it was the Mai Kadra massacre by Tigray-aligned actors and not the Axum massacre. This reframing contests Amnesty International's findings by introducing an alternative atrocity

narrative, redirecting attention to another site of violence, and complicating the moral clarity of their claim. In the second image, “no more” is emphasised with tags for international media, such as CNN, BBC, Reuters, and the UN Secretary-General, suggesting a strategy to counter perceived external interference and biased reporting. This message fosters an adversarial stance between domestic narratives and global institutions, reflecting digital propaganda and framing strategies in conflicts in which actors contest narratives to shape their perceptions of the war. Contrasting atrocity claims aim to produce moral equivalence, diluting specific allegations and undermining the authority of international human rights organisations. Concurrently, rejecting external voices seeks to mobilise nationalist sentiments and delegitimise global scrutiny. These practices illustrate how digital platforms disseminate information and reshape the interpretative framework of violence.

7.2.3. Hashtags: A Tool for Mobilising and Fostering Solidarity Within the Diaspora

During the war on Tigray, digital actors used X hashtags to mobilise internal and diaspora audiences through two approaches: transnational solidarity by Digital Woyane and defensive alignment by the Digital Media Army. The Digital Woyane employed hashtags such as #StandWithTigray, #IStandWithTigray, and #TigrayCantWait to transform humanitarian narratives into transnational advocacy networks, framing global engagement as a moral imperative. These hashtags facilitated a distributed engagement model that integrated users, institutions, and diaspora actors into a shared responsibility framework, where visibility was linked to political urgency. This narrative approach reflects Sorce and Dumitrica (2022) description of the transnational dimension of digital activism: the capacity of digital platforms to construct collective identities and advocacy structures that transcend national borders.

Cheng et al. (2024) recognised that transnational digital advocacy operates through leadership, engagement, and affordance, evident in the Digital Woyane’s hashtag architecture. The Digital Woyane campaign aligns with scholarship on Ethiopian digital activism, identifying the diaspora’s online media as critical stakeholders in the transnational information ecosystem (Saka & Ojo, 2024; Skjerdal, 2011). Due to the state-led internet shutdown in Tigray at the onset of the war, the diaspora became the primary voice of the Digital Woyane, assuming informational and advocacy functions that internal activists could not perform (Nigussie & Kiflu, 2024). The Digital Media Army focused on rallying domestic and allied audiences through hashtags such as #EthiopiaPrevails and #UnityForEthiopia, emphasising national unity and fostering a defensive identity in response to perceived external threats. This approach prioritises internal cohesion and resistance to foreign intervention, framing participation as allegiance to national sovereignty. Although their objectives and audiences differ, both approaches utilise digital tools, particularly hashtags, to unite dispersed individuals into politically cohesive groups. As Bruns and Burgess (2015) point out, hashtags can intentionally create public discourse by uniting people around common interpretations of events.

7.2.4. Hashtags as Weapons of Delegitimisation

Beyond constructing narratives and mobilising audiences, both digital entities engaged in hashtag campaigns to undermine the legitimacy of their opponents. The framing of terrorism by the Digital Media Army illustrates this, embedding the TPLF in a terrorist semantic field through coordinated hashtag repetition. This strategy aimed to discursively achieve what the government pursued militarily: removing the TPLF from the roster of recognised political actors in Ethiopia. The organised, state-sponsored Digital Media Army, directed by senior

officials and using tactics such as propaganda, online debates, and flooding social media with pro-government content, shows that delegitimisation was systematically orchestrated (Nigussie et al., 2024). Related studies also show that coordinated hashtag campaigns amplify narratives and delegitimise opposing interpretations, exhausting adversaries' discursive spaces (Chagas et al., 2022).

Digital Woyane's counter-delegitimisation strategy used a structurally symmetrical, but normatively distinct, logic. By anchoring its narrative in internationally recognised genocide and human rights frameworks and documenting alleged violations through hashtag-organised citizen journalism, Digital Woyane activists aimed to undermine the Ethiopian government's legitimacy. This supports Nigussie and Kiflu's (2024) finding that digital activism in Tigray through citizen journalism and crowdsourced evidence mobilised international attention despite information suppression. Hashtags such as #TigrayGenocide invoke international norms and position the Ethiopian government as violators of international law. Digital Woyane's internationalisation strategy has led to narrative competition, with actors promoting opposing views and interpretations of the war, each seeking digital legitimacy for their perspectives. This suggests that the delegitimising power of hashtag activism, even when morally grounded, inherently imposes costs on conflict resolution, a dimension that has been insufficiently theorised in the digital activism literature. This dynamic, exemplified by the Digital Woyane and Digital Media Army, underscores the role of hashtags as political instruments in conflicts. These hashtags not only shape the conflict narrative but also mobilise supporters and delegitimise adversaries, serving as crucial tools in contemporary information warfare (Chagas et al., 2022; Kebede & Pohjonen, 2025; Miskimmon et al., 2012).

8. Conclusion

This study examines how the Digital Woyane and Digital Media Army used X to shape narratives during the war on Tigray (2020–2022). Digital Woyane highlighted the alleged genocide, mass civilian suffering, siege-induced humanitarian crisis, and calls for international action. Conversely, the Digital Media Army promoted law enforcement, national unity, the designation of the TPLF as a terrorist group, and denial or counter-framing of atrocity claims, often by discrediting the international media and reports on human rights violations. Digital Woyane built an internationally legible moral frame by coupling atrocity imagery, humanitarian symbols (including Médecins Sans Frontières staff deaths), and starvation imagery to portray inaction as complicity and convert dispersed testimonies into coordinated, transnational advocacy. Over time, it shifted from victimhood to resistance (#TigrayWillPrevail). The Digital Media Army focused on a four-pillar strategy—including unity, delegitimisation, denial, and defensive nationalism—using visuals and hashtags to cast foreign scrutiny as neo-colonial intrusion, create moral equivalence through competing atrocity narratives (Mai Kadra vs. Axum), and erode epistemic authority by generating uncertainty rather than rebutting evidence. Across both camps, hashtags functioned at three levels: narrative construction, audience mobilisation (including diaspora dynamics), and opposition delegitimisation, which created mutually irreconcilable realities and reinforced the boundaries between the two camps. Overall, the study shows that digital media control and strategic hashtag use are key to modern conflict: they document suffering and mobilise humanitarian attention, but also amplify propaganda. This implies that durable mitigation requires platform interventions and political-incentive reforms that underpin the weaponisation of digital discourse.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

X posts were used as data sources. Because of terms of service and restrictions on redistributing user-generated content, the dataset cannot be shared. However, Tweets and coding materials are available upon request, subject to ethical and platform requirements.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used Grammarly to improve manuscript clarity and readability. However, it was not used to collect, analyse, interpret, code data, or generate study findings or conclusions. The authors take responsibility for the accuracy and originality of the article.

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