

Social Media “Image Operations” During the Tigray War (2020–2022)

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Abstract

This article examines the use of social media images during the Tigray War (2020–2022), one of the world’s deadliest armed conflicts of the 21st century. Drawing on a corpus of 92.9 million tweets and over 500,000 images shared on Twitter, we analyse what types of images were shared by the opposing sides of the conflict and what specific functions these images served in antagonistic information campaigns. The article shows how images were used not only to amplify the opposing strategic narratives about war but also to shape the emotional or affective registers related to it. The pro-Tigray campaign relied on the heavy use of emotive images of casualties as well as images of material destruction, which, combined with the use of infographics, collectively conveyed victimhood with the goal of putting pressure on the Ethiopian government and its allies. The pro-government side, in turn, relied more on images that tried to evoke patriotism and resistance in the audience, organise protests, as well as represent a stance of anti-colonial defiance against international pressure. The article contributes to the growing literature on digital media in contemporary conflicts by proposing a novel research framework and methodology and providing original empirical findings on an understudied dimension of contemporary conflicts.

Keywords

Ethiopia; image operations; social media; Tigray War; visual propaganda

1. Introduction

Consider two images circulating on social media during the 2020–2022 Tigray war in Ethiopia. The first image, shared as part of the pro-government #NoMore campaign on Twitter (now X), shows a close-up portrait of an Afar warrior, an AK-47 rifle slung over his shoulder. A scarf is draped around his shoulders.

His face and hair are heavily coated in dust, collecting in the creases of his forehead, his eyes, and along his cheeks. His facial features project a proud Afari identity, moulded by years of hardship living in a tough environment (see Figure 1a). The accompanying tweet reads: “We may be poor, but our spirit isn’t. Our clothes may be worn and dirty, but our mind is clear #NoMore #EthiopiaPrevails.” The picture was an instant hit, receiving more than 8,000 likes and 4,000 retweets, and an outpouring of support in the comments.

The second image, shared on Twitter by supporters of the Tigray side in the war, shows a kindergarten destroyed by bombing. Colourful playground equipment is visible through the rubble. Multiple men are seen entering the scene of destruction, one donning a Red Cross vest, looking for survivors. A half-intact wall stands next to the men, painted in bright pink, with a mural of a large colourful butterfly (see Figure 1b). The accompanying tweet reads: “#Ethiopia is [a] murderous state, it’s been killing the children of #Tigray for generations, it’ll never stop murdering innocent kids #MekelleUnderAttack #TigrayGenocide.” Like the first image, this picture received hundreds of expressions of support and outrage.



Figure 1. Images shared on Twitter as part of the (a) pro-government and (b) pro-Tigray information campaigns during the Tigray War.

We begin this article with these two images as they illustrate the tensions underlying this study. Firstly, both images are clearly linked to the strategic aims of the Tigray War. The first was shared by supporters of the Ethiopian government for the #NoMore campaign, which tried to frame the war as an existential battle against foreign enemies grounded in deeply felt pride in Ethiopian history and identity. The second was shared by supporters of the Tigray side as part of its #TigrayGenocide campaign, which tried to frame the war as an act of wanton violence, even genocide, carried out against the Tigrayan people. At the same time, however, there is also something more to these images than just their use as propaganda. The portrait of the Afar warrior captures a feeling of stubborn resistance that goes beyond the immediate war aims of the Ethiopian government. Similarly, the picture of the destroyed kindergarten provokes sympathy for victims of war in ways that are not only reducible to propaganda purposes alone. In one way or another, images also *do something more* in war. Eder and Klonk (2017, p. 12) write that images “suggest actions by their affective or rhetorical force and are directly used as practical tools.” How do we then understand this changing role images have in contemporary conflicts?

This article contributes to the special issue on *Digital Media in Contemporary Conflicts* by interrogating how social media images were used in the Tigray War, a conflict which commentators have called “one of the world’s deadliest armed conflicts of the 21st century” (Weldemichel, 2025). A growing body of scholarship has started to look at the mediated dimensions of the Tigray War. This includes research on citizen journalism (Nigussie & Kiflu, 2024), social media information operations (Haile, 2026), the use of “hatetags” on social media (Orgeret et al., 2026), government’s use of strategic narratives (Kebede & Pohjonen, 2025; Zeleke et al., 2026), polarised social media discourses and contrasting political framings and war narratives (Gessesse & Moges, 2026; Kidane, 2025), and global news representations of the war (Dessie et al., 2026).

To date, however, little research has focused specifically on the role of images. To address this gap, we draw on over 500,000 images shared on Twitter during the Tigray War (2020–2022) to ask the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of images were shared by opposing parties of the Tigray War?

RQ2: How did the use of images differ between the pro-government and pro-Tigray information campaigns?

RQ3: What functions did these images perform within these opposing campaigns?

This article addresses these questions by developing what we call, following de Seta et al. (2024), a synthetic ethnographic approach to visual war propaganda. Methodologically, this approach differs from orthodox qualitative or computational methods by foregrounding a more exploratory research approach that combines the capabilities of new AI tools, and especially large language models (LLMs), with more contextually driven ethnographic engagement. We operationalise this approach to explore the visual politics of the Tigray War by focusing on the Tigray War Twitter dataset, a corpus of 92.9 million tweets and over 500,000 images collected between the 1 September 2020 (a month before the war began) and 30 November 2022 (a month after the signing of the Pretoria peace agreement). Theoretically, our research builds on the concept of “image operations” (Eder & Klonek, 2017) as a framework to better understand what functions the images shared by government and Tigray-side supporters served in the antagonistic war campaigns. Our exploratory analysis of 8,662 images shows how pro-government supporters deployed proportionally more images of protests, flags, politicians, and the military to highlight their criticism of international pressure and deflect accusations of human rights violations. The pro-Tigray campaign, in contrast, relied more on images of civilian suffering and destruction in an effort to recruit support and provoke international condemnation for human rights violations.

More broadly, while the hundreds of thousands of images shared during a complex war cannot, and should not, be reduced to simple narratives, we nonetheless argue that foregrounding the image operations, the specific campaigns that these images were shared as a part of, can provide a powerful new analytical framework to understand the role of social media images in contemporary digitally mediated conflicts. The article thus contributes to the literature by suggesting a novel research framework as well as providing original empirical findings on an understudied topic.

2. The Many Uses of Images in Contemporary Conflicts

Millions of images are shared during contemporary conflicts. This includes a hotchpotch of material: grainy footage of violence, atrocities and casualties, posters calling for coordinated protests, images of infographics with facts about the war, patriotic pictures of flags and soldiers, and memes mixing images and text to ridicule adversaries. Given this diversity of material in circulation, how can we think systematically about the different roles images and other visual material have in contemporary conflicts?

Scholarly research on images in war has a long history. From Capa's iconic Fallen Soldier in the Spanish Civil War, to the Napalm Girl during the Vietnam War, from green night-vision footage of the 1991 Gulf War to the horror-like images from Abu Ghraib, images have always been central to how war is conducted, supported, and resisted. This includes a rich body of work on topics such as visual frames in wartime news coverage (Griffin, 2010), emotional effects of conflict images on audiences (Brantner et al., 2011), visual propaganda on social media (Hussain & Fahmy, 2024), and the weaponisation of images as disinformation (Hameleers, 2024). In recent years, the mass availability of mobile phones and social media platforms have also made the production and sharing of images more prominent than ever before. Eder and Klonk (2017, p. 4) write that "the way in which images today can be produced and widely published by nearly anybody, bypassing newsrooms and editorial boards, is unprecedented." This shift from the earlier rarefied visual news environment to today's hyper-visual one thus raises the question of what theoretical, methodological and empirical frameworks can help best untangle its consequences.

The research on the role of images in war can be loosely organised around two distinct, albeit often overlapping, epistemological orientations. The first foregrounds the *strategic narratives* that images promote as part of wartime propaganda. This line of research includes empirical work on topics such as the conflicting narratives on Twitter during the 2012 Israeli/Hamas conflict (Seo, 2014); the different ways national governments use images to shape their national image abroad (Manor & Crilley, 2018); how war-time "imagefare" is used to "garner international support in the Ukraine Russia war and balance the conflict by receiving international assistance" (Yarchi, 2025, p. 214); and, more recently, the proliferation of AI-generated imagery in public diplomacy (Crilley & Saunders, 2025). The second orientation, in turn, loosely foregrounds the more *affective or emotional* dimension of images. In this line of thinking, images are seen as doing more in conflict than just supporting strategic narratives. Butler (2009), for instance, uses the concept "image frames" to describe how images also shape what we see, feel, and consider morally important. Ahmed (2004) uses the term "affective economies" to suggest how the production and sharing of images is linked to the broader circulation of emotions in contemporary media environments. Bleiker (2009), in turn, refers to the "aesthetic and affective dimensions" of images to explain how they provoke emotional relationships between spectators and subjects in ways that have far-reaching ethical and political consequences. Some of the empirical research on such affective/emotional dimensions of war images include the use of Abu Ghraib torture photographs to produce "affective triggers" (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2008); research on how YouTube and Instagram visuals have forged new ways for audiences to engage with conflict (Christensen, 2008); or research on how images during the Russian war in Ukraine provided affective anchors to "reactivate collective memory and dominant discourses and construct emotional relationships between an audience and mediated events" (Grigor & Pantti, 2021, p. 141).

Yet images are also used in contemporary conflicts in ways that are not reducible to their expressive, representational, or referential functions alone. Eder and Klonk (2017) write that images “influence events in very different ways: they generate knowledge that is acted upon, suggest actions by their affective or rhetorical force, and are directly used as practical tools” (pp. 11–12). From this perspective, understanding the use of images during conflict is best achieved by focusing on the actions—or what they call “image operations”—through which images are produced, shared, and consumed as part of documenting atrocities, mobilising support, fostering identity through shared iconography, legitimising military action, or discrediting the opposition. This type of thinking on the agentive role of images during contemporary conflicts builds on work such as Bredekamp’s (2018) concept of “image acts,” Farocki’s (2004) notion of “operational images,” and Hansen’s (2011, 2015) work on “visual securitisation,” all of which suggest that images also can perform complex functions that surpass their referential functions.

Building on these divergent strands of visual theory, our research thus operationalises two such sub-types of image operations for our analysis. The first focuses on the informational functions of images (e.g., images shared to disseminate facts, articulate narratives, set agendas or provide information using explicitly textual or factual semantic material). The second focuses on the more affective/emotional functions of images (e.g., images shared to trigger sympathy, outrage, fear, pride, or grief, but without containing explicitly factual or textual elements in the images). It is also important to note that these categories are not meant as *de facto* semantic categories nor were they the only categories of actions around how images were used in the Tigray War. This research also did not have access to the motivations of the people who produced or shared these images or the responses of the audiences who reacted to them (e.g., gained through interviews or through other methods)—and we do not make strong empirical claims about this. Rather, drawing on previous literature, what our research does is provide an exploratory framework to research the heterogeneous role of images in contemporary conflicts based on our ongoing engagement with digital politics in Ethiopia. We describe this in more detail in the next section.

3. A Synthetic Ethnography of Visual War Propaganda

Understanding hundreds of thousands of images is not a trivial problem. It requires approaches that can both untangle the large-scale time-based patterns in these images as well as their deeper contextual meanings. In recent years, several methodologies have been developed to do this by merging computational analysis of images with more qualitative interpretation of their contextual significance. These mixed-method approaches include Manovich’s (2023) “cultural analytics,” Arnold and Tilton’s (2023) “distant viewing,” or Rogers’s (2021) “metapicturing.” More recently, the use of machine learning, and the growing sophistication of LLMs for visual analysis have also bootstrapped new AI tools for qualitative researchers hoping to explore images at a scale not possible before (Arminio et al., 2026).

Building on the growing capability of AI-driven approaches, our study developed what we call a synthetic ethnography of wartime visual propaganda. This methodological approach was initially proposed by de Seta et al. (2024) as a new way to combine ethnographic research with the study of new generative AI models. One way that this can be done is through creating what are called “field devices,” temporary research infrastructures that act as “practical and experimental ways to repurpose these technologies as research tools” to help reconfigure ethnographic research to the challenges of generative AI models (de Seta et al., 2024, p. 2). Taking cue from this, our research also wanted to explore the use of visual AI models for visual

analysis in a way where the primary focus was not inferential analysis but, instead, to augment ethnographic research with the help of larger datasets (see Pohjonen, 2020).

To operationalise this methodology to the visual politics of the Tigray War, we focused on the Tigray War Twitter dataset. This is a corpus of 92.9 million tweets and over 500,000 images posted between 1 September 2020 (a month before the war began) and 30 November 2022 (a month after the signing of the Pretoria peace agreement). Moreover, to better understand how images were used and shared during this two-year war period, we developed the following workflow.

The first step was data exploration. Firstly, to gain an overall understanding of the 500,000+ images in our dataset, we used different data visualisation tools to cluster images based on their similarity. Figure 2 shows one of the techniques we employed, using pixel-level similarity for this purpose.

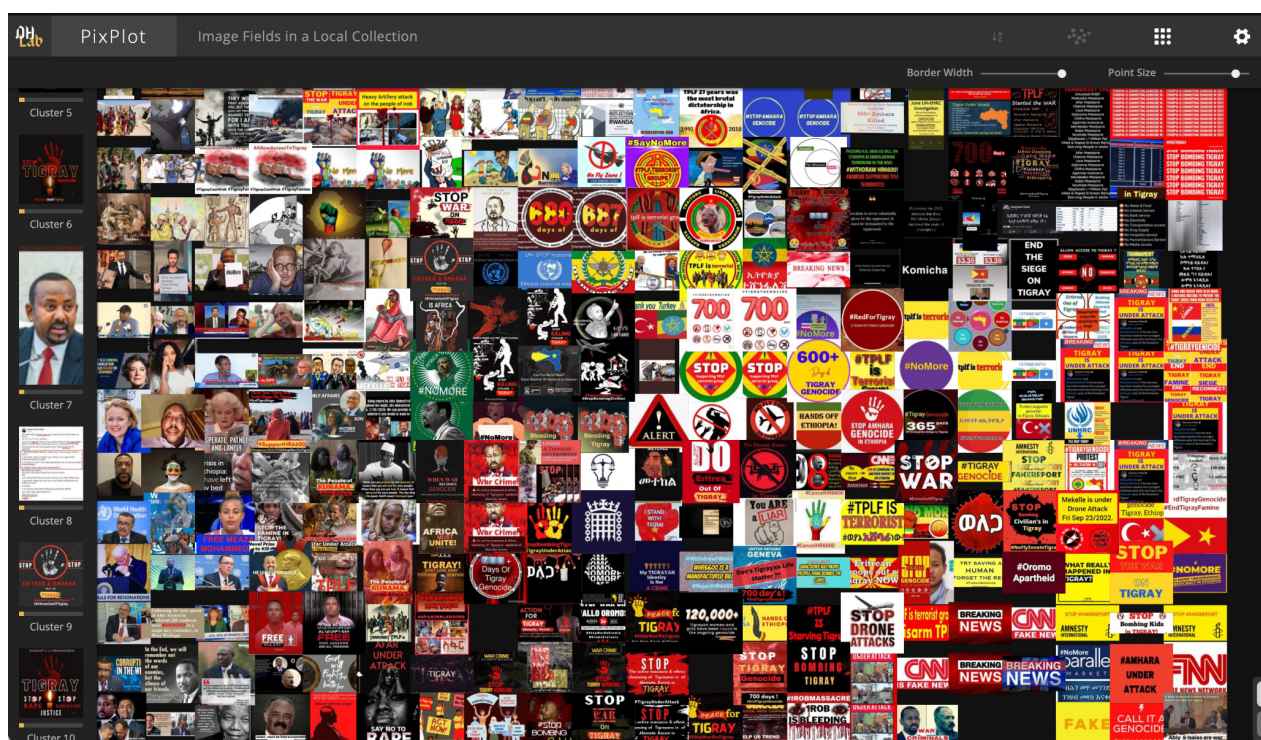


Figure 2. Initial exploration of visual similarities using an image clustering tool, PixPlot.

The second step was iterative fine-tuning of the research design. Once we were confident of the broader distribution of the image types in the dataset, we developed a research design that combined our ongoing ethnographic engagement with the digital dimensions of the Tigray War with more large-scale exploration of the images shared during the war. Through iteratively testing different approaches, we decided to use a two-tier image classification system based on the literature and our previous research. The first tier divided the images into 12 image categories that we wanted to explore more as part of our RQs: (a) casualties, (b) military, (c) destruction, (d) protest, (e) mobilisation event, (f) politicians, (g) flags, (h) memes and cartoons, (i) shared other media, (j) infographics, (k) maps, and (l) other (as a residual category). The second tier, in turn, explored the informational and affective/emotional elements in the images. This was done by giving each image a 0–3 value depending on whether it contained more informational elements (e.g., indicated by the

prevalence of written text or facts) or whether it contained more affective elements (e.g., indicated by the prevalence of more non-textual components such as images of casualties, corpses, etc.). We also iteratively fine-tuned more ambiguous categories for our analysis (e.g., “military,” for instance, was narrowed to only operational contexts, with ceremonial and portrait imagery redirected to “politicians”). Similarly, some of the images contained elements of more than one of the categories used (e.g., a politician addressing a rally in military fatigues or a meme incorporating casualty photography), so we also explicitly specified categories for borderline cases. We are aware that all these decisions impose analytical trade-offs that have a bearing on the findings. However, as these categories were developed to augment our more qualitative and ethnographic research, these trade-offs were manageable.

The third step was image classification. Once we were confident that this classification schema was suitable for our specific RQs, we produced a random sample of the full dataset for more granular analysis. This was done by creating a 2% stratified random sample of the 407,000 unique tweets that contained images combined with a 100-image monthly minimum to guarantee sufficient coverage for all months. This resulted in the final dataset of 8,662 images. Our sampling strategy also included trade-offs that unavoidably have a bearing on the findings. Firstly, sampling was done at the tweet level rather than at the image level to avoid multi-image tweets from dominating. Secondly, it only used a 2% sampling rate and a monthly floor of a minimum of 100 images for computational effectiveness and cost. While relatively small, this sample nonetheless provided a sufficiently large dataset to understand both the pro-government and pro-Tigray campaigns over the two-year war period. The random sample was then classified using two different LLMs. The first round was done with Moonshot v1-128k-vision-preview. The second round was done using Google’s Gemini 2.5 Flash to flag disagreements between the models for manual verification and for sanity testing the method. We also computed statistical agreement between the two models, but this number was used primarily as a diagnostic tool rather than a validation statistic. This is because a coefficient such as Cohen’s κ presupposes a stable ground truth against which the coding can be scored and, for exploratory analysis of this kind, no such ground truth existed independently of our qualitative interpretation.

The fourth step was visual analysis of the results. Once the classification was done, we then checked its applicability to our RQs by creating an interactive exploration dashboard. This allowed us to: (a) verify the suitability of the results for our RQs; (b) identify time-based events and patterns to focus on more qualitatively; (c) filter subsets of images by research criteria such as hashtag alignment, time period, engagement, and accompanying tweet text; and (d) share results between the two authors for iterative analysis and discussion. Figure 3 shows the exploratory dashboard we created for the deeper qualitative exploration that the research findings are grounded in.

The fifth and final step was the ethical discussion and researcher positionality. We are aware that interpretive research on a contested war can never be fully neutral. Our research builds on engagement with digital politics in Ethiopia that now spans more than a decade (see Gagliardone & Pohjonen, 2016). This long experience, while never a guarantee of objectivity, we hope, has provided sufficient distance from either side of the conflict (see Pohjonen, 2022). We are also aware that use of terminology reflects deliberate choices. We used the term “Tigray War” primarily because this is a common term used, but we are aware that alternative terms such as the “Ethiopian civil war” or “the war on Tigray” each carry different political implications. We also used terms such as “pro-government” and “pro-Tigray” as convenient labels for online campaign alignments but not for political affiliation. Similarly, when we say the pro-Tigray campaign circulated claims of genocide, massacres

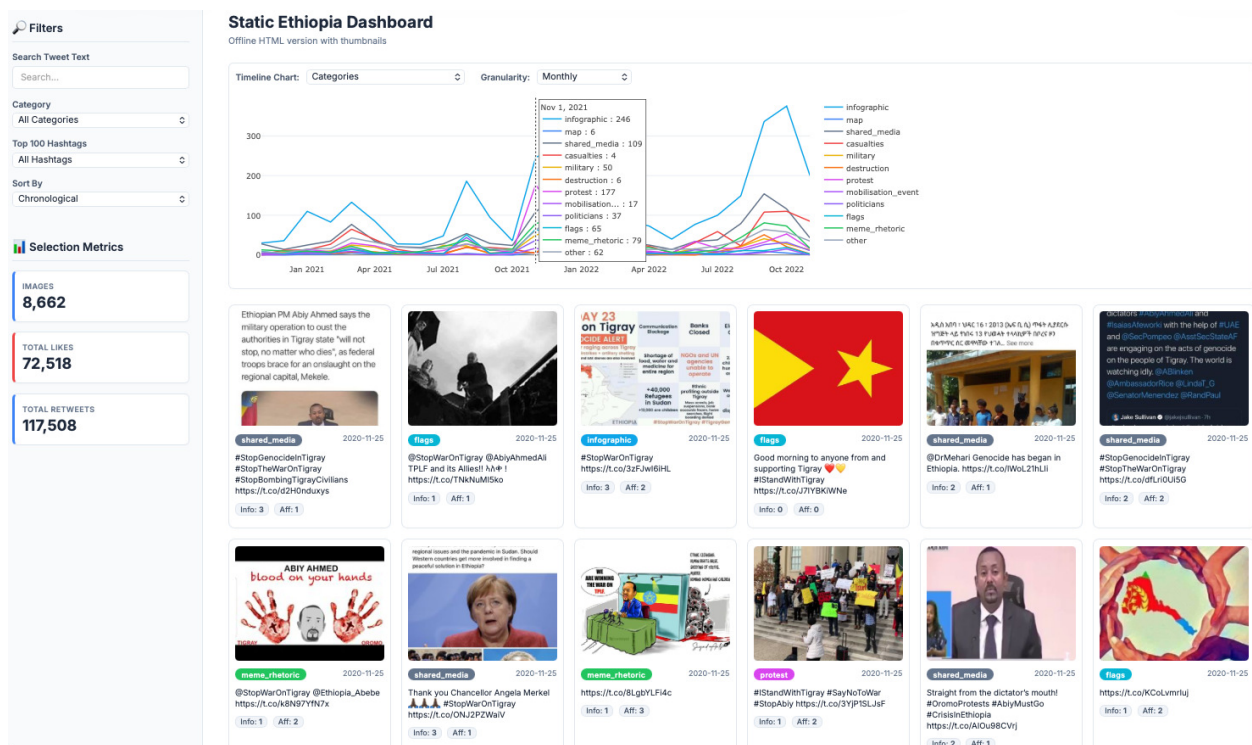


Figure 3. The custom dashboard created to interactively explore the data.

and siege-induced starvation, or when the pro-government campaign did something similar, for instance in relation to the claims of the use of child soldiers, we are describing the contents of the campaign and not presenting it as fact (even if some claims have been substantiated by independent investigations). The corpus also contains a substantial quantity of images depicting death and serious injury. We have not included any of these images in the article. This follows the principle that people who did not consent to the circulation of images of their own injury or death should not have that circulation extended by our analysis. Finally, we have also only focused on the perspectives of the supporters of the Ethiopian federal government and the supporters of the Tigray side. We have purposefully omitted the more complex geopolitical dimensions of the war from the analysis, such as the role played by Eritrea or the internal politics between the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray within Ethiopia. These were present in the data, but these questions would warrant a separate article to provide their complexity sufficient justice which we were not able to do here.

What is also important to stress here is that the methodology (illustrated by the steps above) was not developed as a generalisable research method that can be applied to other case studies, at least without further development and testing. Instead, this synthetic ethnographic “field device” should be seen more as a provisional research tool, a temporary data infrastructure created for the explicit purpose of collaborative research and augmenting the qualitative interpretive analysis.

4. Social Media and Visual Propaganda During the Tigray War

The war that erupted in November 2020 was the culmination of a long series of political changes in Ethiopia. Years of youth protests between 2015 and 2018 forced the longstanding ruling party, Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, to make concessions after 27 years in power. One of the key concessions was

bringing Abiy Ahmed to power as party chairman and prime minister in 2018. The new prime minister began to quickly implement radical changes to established Ethiopian political power structures, including ousting members of the hitherto dominant party within the ruling coalition, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), from positions of power. This led to tensions between the federal government and the TPLF, which has its ethnic power base in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. These tensions erupted into full-scale war on 3 November 2020, when forces loyal to the TPLF attacked the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces in what they described as pre-emptive strikes. Forces from neighbouring Eritrea, and special forces of Ethiopia's federal regions, particularly Amhara and Afar, joined the war in support of the Federal Government.

What followed was a devastating two-year war, in which four distinct phases can be identified. Initially, within the first three weeks, the Ethiopian army and its allies successfully overran the Tigray region and ejected the TPLF from Mekelle to the mountains of Tigray, taking control of the region. In the second phase, the TPLF forces recovered, reorganised, and, bolstered by new recruits, dislodged the Ethiopian/Eritrean forces from most of the region, taking control of the capital Mekelle by mid-2021. While the government declared a unilateral ceasefire, TPLF forces (now rebranded as Tigray Defence Forces) pushed southwards into Afar and Amhara regions, aiming to take control of the national capital Addis Ababa. This prompted panic and nationwide mass mobilisation. In the third phase, armed with newly acquired Turkish and UAE drones, the Ethiopian government managed to recapture lost territories, pushed TPLF forces back into the Tigray region, and declared a humanitarian truce by March 2022. Fighting resumed after six months in August 2022, perhaps the bloodiest phase of the war, as each side attempted to consolidate its negotiating position amid mounting international pressure and humanitarian crisis. The federal government made significant gains and put the TPLF on the back foot, before the conflict was finally concluded by a permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed in Pretoria on 2 November 2022, two years after the start of the war.

4.1. Key Periods, Events, and Trends in the Shared Images During the Tigray War

The context for the online and social media dimensions of the Tigray War is the contested media environment in Ethiopia (Workneh, 2021). The brief opening of Ethiopia's media environment that followed Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's accession in 2018 initially led to journalists being released, exiled diaspora broadcasters being permitted to return, and hundreds of blocked websites being restored. These changes, however, were quickly reversed as the conflict in Ethiopia escalated. Telecommunications in Ethiopia effectively remained a state monopoly, and this control over the media environment enabled the federal government to impose a near-total communications blackout on Tigray for almost the entire war (Chala & Workneh, 2026). With a media blackout and restricted access by journalists from the war areas, the informational dimensions of conflict moved to social media and, largely, Twitter. Wilmot et al. (2021, para. 5) write that:

Amid the information and access constraints, competing information campaigns emerged to frame the conflict for English-language Twitter. On one side, Tigrayans and their allies used Twitter to engage in online activism and to share information about events taking place in the region. In reaction to this movement, the Ethiopian government and its supporters launched counter-information campaigns to discredit Tigrayan activists, framing the violence as fabricated, exaggerated, or caused by the TPLF.

The front-line events of the war were also, thus, paralleled in the social media dimensions of the war. Orgeret et al. (2026, p. 8) write that "within hours of the military offensive...Tigrayan diaspora networks,

most visibly those based in North America and Europe, mobilized on Twitter/X, disseminating hashtags such as #StandWithTigray and, soon after, #TigrayGenocide.” Meanwhile, pro-government accounts activated hashtag campaigns such as #EthiopiaPrevails and #UnityforEthiopia. As the conflict progressed, other more organised campaigns also emerged, such as the prominent #NoMore campaign launched by supporters of the Ethiopian government. Figure 4 shows a timeline of the key conflict periods reflected in the data.

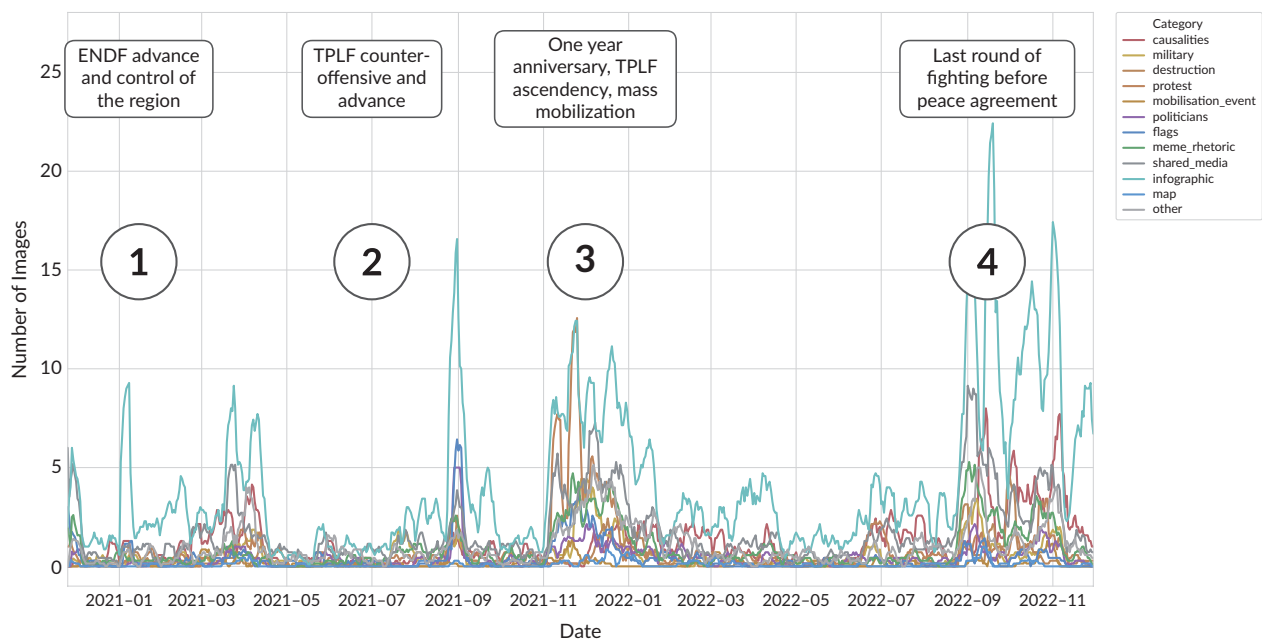


Figure 4. A daily timeline of key periods during the Tigray War reflected in the image data.

When we look at the longitudinal trends in the data, both the volume of the shared images and their thematic focus closely reflect the overall strategies of the two campaigns during the two-year war. This included different types of informational material (such as infographics, maps and shared media, using a combination of charts, photographs, hashtags and slogans to influence the audiences’ understanding of the conflict), as well as more affective/emotional images (such as images of casualties and destruction as well as memes, flags, and pictures of military action with little or no text) aimed at provoking feelings of outrage or support.

At the same time, there were also significant differences between the two campaigns. The pro-government activity was concentrated more around the first-year anniversary of the war and especially around the #NoMore campaign, which spiked around November and December 2021. It also relied on more symbolic images of protests and flags, as well as images of the political and military leadership as symbols of resistance. This reflected its efforts to reframe the war as a battle for survival by an independent Ethiopian state proudly resisting a war by a rogue TPLF and international forces bent on destroying Ethiopian independence and territorial integrity. Conversely, the pro-Tigray informational campaign rallied behind the popular hashtag #TigrayGenocide. Unlike the pro-government efforts, the supporters of the Tigray side maintained a consistently active volume throughout the war. Notably, this campaign also contained a larger proportion of images of casualties and destruction as part of its attempt to reframe the war as an act of violence against the Tigrayan population around its core theme of genocide. Figure 5 highlights the differences in the types of image categories preferred by the two opposing image operations.

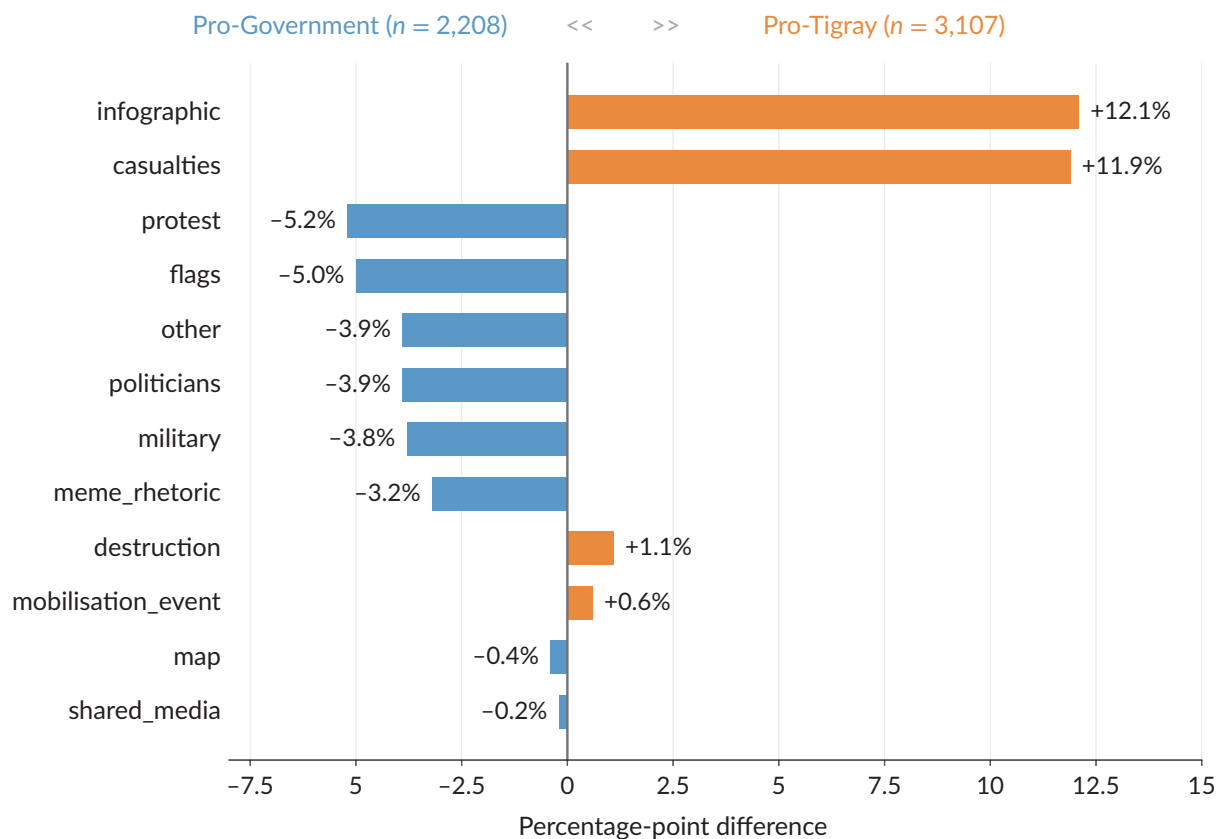
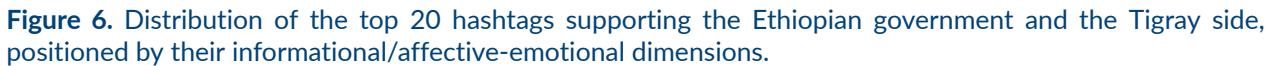


Figure 5. Proportional differences in image categories between pro-government and pro-Tigray images.

In addition to these differences, the data also show how the shared images of the two campaigns diverged in their informational and affective/emotional dimensions. While the images in the pro-government campaign tried to promote feelings of national pride, these images did not manage to match the affective tenor of the #TigrayGenocide campaign. The Tigray-side maintained a lead both in the volume of images shared as well as in their affective/emotional dimensions. Figure 6 shows the top 20 most popular pro-government and pro-Tigray hashtags categorised into their informational/affective dimensions.

While these overall patterns in the data are of course partially an outcome of how the images were classified by our approach, these findings are also confirmed by other research (Gebremichael, 2026), which similarly argues that the key aim of the pro-government campaign was to create a counter-narrative of anti-colonial resistance to foreign intervention (as illustrated by its #NoMore hashtag), whereas the pro-Tigray campaign tried to elicit international condemnation of massacres and violence (as illustrated by its popular #TigrayGenocide hashtag).



The first differentiating category in the pro-Tigray campaign was the proportionally more significant use of “infographics.” These infographics focused on factually showcasing—through a combination of text, images,

and overlay graphics—the suffering of the Tigrayan population, providing information from the blackout areas in Tigray and often containing calls to action to try to compel the international community to act. These infographics were also coordinated, often consisting of identical images appearing across multiple tweets. While their core function was conveying information, these well-designed images also include more affective/emotional elements in them to stress the emotional urgency of the message, including bold red text and bloody handprints, emaciated children, women with physical trauma, and victims of war. Figure 7 shows examples of the types of popular infographics shared by the pro-Tigray supporters.

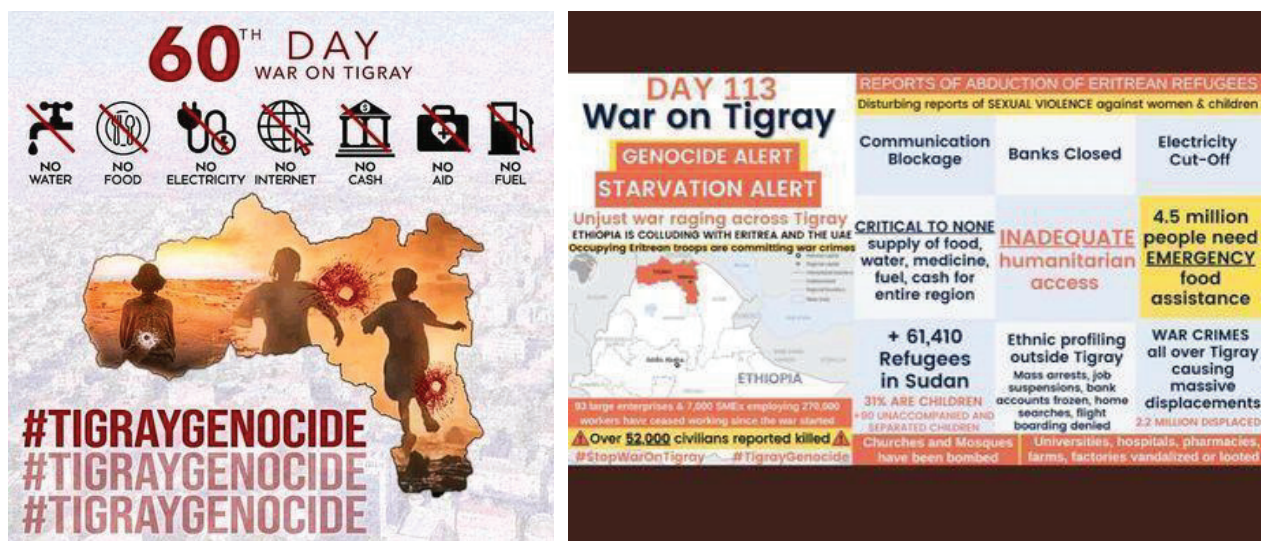


Figure 7. Examples of infographics used by the pro-Tigray campaign.

The second key differentiating category was the widespread use of “images of casualties.” Unlike images that relied more on text to convey the message of “genocide,” this category included raw, graphic, and disturbing images of war that had little or no text included. These images were often of motionless corpses, bodies with war wounds and physical trauma/injury, images of survivors of bombings, and images of casualties of mass executions. The core theme promoted by this use of imagery was to highlight the suffering of a civilian population undergoing siege, starvation, and physical and psychological trauma because of the war. The focus on death, trauma, and especially children and women, was widely used to signal the victimhood of the innocent in the war, ostensibly to get the audience to emotionally advocate for the victims in ways that more textual or factual representation would not allow.

The third popular category in the #TigrayGenocide campaign was “images of destruction.” These images, in turn, portray the aftermath of battles, drone strikes, and bombings, showing the impacts of the war on the physical infrastructure of the region. Where the category of casualties included humans, this category instead showed pictures of the destruction of the material basis of life in the region. This included buildings, schools, vehicles, residences, medical facilities, and religious institutions such as churches and mosques, and other infrastructure that were either partially destroyed or vandalised. Figure 8 shows some examples of such images from our dataset.



Figure 8. Examples of images of destruction and vandalism used by the Tigray campaign: cultural heritage (a), medical facility (b).

4.3. Pro-Government Image Operations During the Tigray War

In comparison, the pro-government image operation was more reactive to the more dominant (in volume) pro-Tigray campaign. Initially, the pro-government campaign was launched to challenge the narrative of the pro-Tigray campaign and bolster the government's own war efforts, echoing government talking points. The campaign used hashtags like #EthiopiaPrevails and #TPLFTerroristGroup to frame the war simultaneously as an internal Ethiopian matter and an existential threat to the Ethiopian state. As the war progressed and international pressure on Ethiopia amplified, the pro-government campaign morphed into broader criticism of international actors as well, particularly Western actors, which were seen as supporting the TPLF or seen as unfairly targeting the Ethiopian government. It also attempted to discredit specific accusations of massacres and atrocities against it, such as the Axum massacre, through hashtags such as #FakeAxumMassacre and to accuse the opposing side of human rights violations and the use of child soldiers. Finally, in moments when the war spilt outside the Tigray region, the pro-government campaign also resorted to advocacy for the affected regions, through hashtags such as #AmharaUnderAttack and #AfarUnderAttack. However, the dominant hashtag used by the government was #NoMore, which was concentrated around November–December 2021, when TPLF forces pushed South toward the capital city, Addis Ababa, to take control of the capital and unseat the government.

Accordingly, three categories of images were more dominant in the #NoMore campaign that differentiated the pro-government campaign from the Tigray-supporter side. The first popular category in the pro-government campaigning was “images of protests.” These shared images included protest images, large crowds gathered in public squares and streets, rallies, and people holding protest signs in both Ethiopian and Western cities. In these images, colours of the Ethiopian flag were often visible in banners, headbands, wristbands, and T-shirts, aimed at raising nationalistic pride. The protest visuals were usually accompanied by signs that criticise Western governments and media and portray a kind of non-interventionist ethos challenging US and international pressure on the Ethiopian government as undue intervention and thereby advancing an anti-colonial narrative. Western media was a central target. These signs read “BBC, stop fake news in Ethiopia”; “USA, stop sucking our blood”; “CNN, fake news”; “Ethiopia cannot be another Afghanistan”; “respect Ethiopian sovereignty! US out of the Horn!”

These same narratives cut through the second category as well: “memes.” If the aim of the protest images was to raise feelings of resistance, the memes tried to do the same, but in a more humorous manner (see

Mare, 2020). Some of the key characters included the American President Joe Biden and the then Secretary of State Antony Blinken, World Health Organisation director Tedros Adhanom, Abiy Ahmed, as well as other commentators and media personalities who were critical of the Ethiopian government. Another common trope was to link the calls to intervene in the Tigray war to the history of US-led interventions in other Middle Eastern countries, warning of the potential consequences for Ethiopia if a similar path is followed. One example of such a popular meme repurposed the image of the Grim Reaper, a staple of internet culture, going through doors labelled Iraq, Libya, and Syria, leaving blood and destruction behind—but with Ethiopia as its next target. The memes also portrayed the news media as liars and sources of disinformation. In these memes, criticism of the news media and CNN serves as a stand-in for Western media, showing news logos alongside labels such as “fake news” and “lies.” Another popular meme shows Antony Blinken, appearing on CNN, with the headline in bold at the bottom reading “MENELIK II JOINS THE WAR,” referring to the Ethiopian emperor who led the country to victory at Adwa against Italian invading forces in 1896, improbably joining a war in 2020. Collectively, these shared images represent strong anti-interventionist sentiment, Ethiopian nationalist and pan-Africanist imagery, and criticism of Western media and interference. Figure 9 shows examples of popular memes that were shared in the #NoMore campaign.

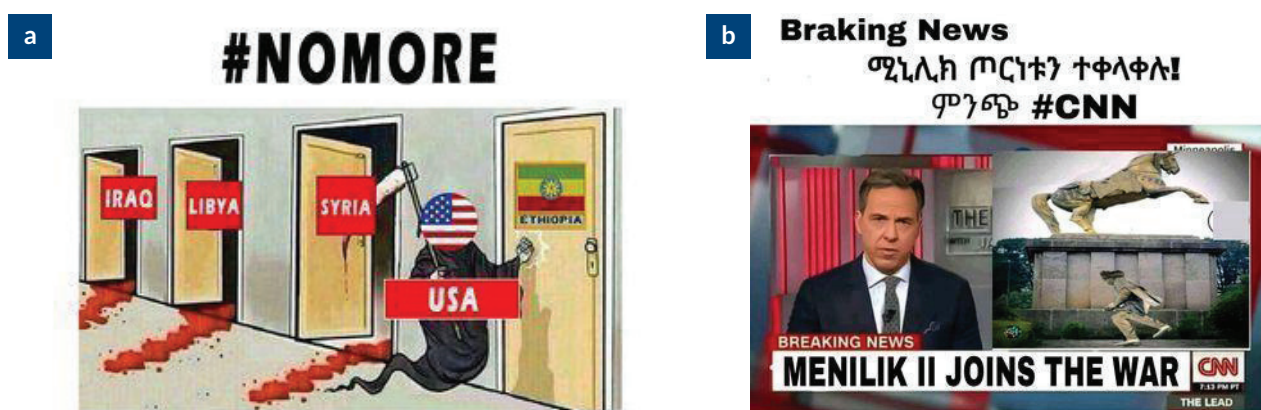


Figure 9. Memes shared by the pro-government campaign, including the US as the Grim Reaper (a) and CNN as fake news (b).

Finally, the #NoMore campaign shared a high proportion of “images of the military and politicians.” This included images of armed soldiers in uniform in various settings, often surrounded by Ethiopian flags, in groups, huddled together around armaments, and loaded on trucks. These images portray soldiers as weathered, battered, and covered in dust and mud, carrying heavy loads, to evoke an image of endurance and heroic sacrifice for their country. Alternatively, the soldiers are also painted as invincible and indestructible, in which case the images show close-ups of fit soldiers, with resolute faces and modern weapons. In addition to the military, politicians, particularly the image of the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed himself, were important as symbols of defiance and resistance. Thus, images of the prime minister in military uniform surveying the terrain, standing at attention, and consulting with the military top brass became a staple of the #NoMore campaign. Figure 10 shows these images.

Read alongside, and in relation to, each other, these two image operations thus suggest both similarities—but also differences—in how images were used by the antagonistic sides of the Tigray War. The pro-Tigray campaign operated through a mobilisation of affective/emotional images, such as dead bodies, destruction, and factual infographics with overlay images of suffering, emphasising the human consequences of the war.



Figure 10. Shared images of the military and politicians: A soldier (a) and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in army fatigues (b).

The pro-government campaign, on the contrary, used images aimed at evoking resistance and patriotism, such as images of flags, memes, soldiers, or the prime minister in military fatigues, to paint a picture of resistance to foreign intervention into Ethiopian domestic affairs as well as discredit Western news media coverage of the war. This, however, does not mean that the informational machinery of the Ethiopian state was not effective. On the contrary, that apparatus remained throughout the war proactive and stratified, consisting of state-owned media, coordinated networks of affiliated digital contributors, and a foundational nation-building strategy that were used during the Tigray War and expanded after the war (Pohjonen et al., 2026).

5. Conclusion

“Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us,” Sontag (2002, p. 94) famously said. But how exactly do images haunt us? Developing an exploratory research approach to visual war propaganda, we suggest that images have heterogeneous functions in contemporary conflicts that evade simple analytical frameworks. They can amplify the core propaganda aims of war, but they can also trigger emotional sympathy or condemnation of the adversary. Images are also often shared for specific aims as part of specific war-time image operations.

It is in these situated image operations, we argue in this article, that the role of images can be best understood in contemporary conflicts. Our analysis of over 500,000 images thus provides new evidence on how and why different images are shared in the heat of war. The pro-Tigray campaign combined emotive images of casualties and material destruction with infographics to convey a sense of victimhood and put pressure on the Ethiopian government and its allies. The pro-government campaign instead relied more on protests, flags, and memes to evoke patriotism and project anti-colonial defiance against what its participants framed as unfair Western intervention and bias. Our qualitative reading of the two campaigns also highlights how the hundreds of thousands of images shared cannot be understood only by looking at their content alone. Rather, these images need to be situated within the image operations that they form a part of. Moreover, such image operations—like on-the-ground battles—are also often relational: They need to be understood in relation to the actions taken by the opposing side. In the case of the Tigray War, this is clearly seen in how the supporters of the Ethiopian government tried to use images to respond to the success of the Tigray side in promoting

its core narrative of human rights violations, attacks on civilians, and even genocide. This relational nature of contemporary image operations is now further augmented by the algorithmic affordances of social media platforms that allow users to respond to trends in the information environment in almost real time.

Empirical research on social media visual propaganda has so far focused mostly on more geopolitically visible conflicts such as the Israel/Palestine conflict or the Russian war on Ukraine. Our research on the Tigray War, however, also shows how widespread use of images has become as important, if not more important, in other conflicts globally. As such, the research provides empirical evidence that both contribute to existing theories of digital propaganda but also, in part, help decentre the West-centric analysis by providing empirical evidence from an under-researched conflict. At the same time, our exploratory research on a topic with little precedent also carries clear limitations. The approach we developed for the specific context of the Tigray War needs further testing before it can be applied to other conflicts. Our use of visual LLMs likewise needs development beyond its present role as a heuristic tool. The vision-language models we used are also trained predominantly on English-language and Western imagery, which can affect the classification of Ethiopian material, such as widespread use of citations to the Battle of Adwa, Emperor Menelik II, church and monastery architecture, regional dress, and embedded Amharic and Tigrinya text. Even if the research's final interpretation was always done by the authors rather than the model, this mitigates but does not fully remove these limitations.

Finally, our research also focused on still images shared on Twitter, which has now closed off its data access to researchers. This significantly complicates the future ability to do such large-scale comparative research in different global settings. Moreover, since the Tigray War, information campaigns have also become more multimodal. Our next priority is thus to test the applicability of this approach to more multimodal content, and particularly short-form video, to see how the framework can be adapted to the latest changes to the information environment. How, for instance, would the informational/affective dimensions of images used in this research potentially apply to the more algorithmically curated short-form video on TikTok? Or to the new generation of AI-generated images, video, and music that increasingly structures how conflict participants wage their online proxy wars? Hopefully, the approach developed in this article can nonetheless provide a few novel ideas on how to move forward to think systematically about the role of images in contemporary conflicts, both in the idiosyncratic case of Ethiopia as well as in other global conflicts more broadly.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data is not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure

LLMs were used in the article to assist in the structuring and wrangling of data and to brainstorm ideas—but not in the writing of the article. The tools used included the following: (a) The exploratory data pipeline was created with the help of Cursor and Antigravity, two Agentic AI IDEs that use different LLMs to assist in writing code—these were used for coding support, such as creating the Python pipeline for AI classification and the data exploration dashboards; (b) Chinese open-source model Qwen 2.5 was also used in the earlier versions of the project to assist in the earlier stages of iterative visual exploration and classification of the images; (c) two visual LLMs, Moonshot v1-128k-vision-preview and Gemini 2.5 Flash, were used to classify the images for the final edit; finally, (d) the agentic AI platform, Claude Cowork, was used to brainstorm ideas, identify gaps in the literature, and to check grammar and references—Claude Sonnet and Claude Opus were mostly used for these routine tasks.

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