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From War to Meme: Lego-Style Animation, Toy-Like Propaganda, and Meme-Based Affective Warfare in Instagram Conflict Narratives

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Abstract
This study examines Lego-style political animation circulated by Explosive Media on Instagram as toy-like propaganda and meme-based affective warfare. Using an interpretive qualitative design, it analyzes selected Instagram videos through moving images, sound, captions, hashtags, engagement indicators, top-ranked comments, and publicly available creator interview materials. The findings identify five overlapping mechanisms: enemy humiliation, geopolitical gamification, sacred and civilizational memory, humanitarian grief linked to retaliatory legitimacy, and alternative-news credibility claims. The study argues that Lego-style animation does not merely simplify conflict; it miniaturizes violence, distances it from graphic realism, compresses ideology into repeatable signs, and supports platform circulation. Toy-like propaganda names this visual-rhetorical form, while meme-based affective warfare describes how humor, music, grief, sacred memory, credibility claims, and visible commenter participation make conflict narratives emotionally engaging, repeatable, and contestable.

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Introduction

Political propaganda increasingly circulates through forms associated with digital entertainment, including memes, short videos, music, animation, satire, and gaming references. Online video has become an important vehicle for wartime propaganda and counter-propaganda, while digital influence may involve institutions, creators, automated actors, and networked communities (Allendorfer & Herring, 2015; Boichak, 2023; Marigliano et al., 2024; Woolley, 2016). In Internet-based new media environments, propaganda is no longer limited to centralized, one-way communication. Instagram combines short-form video, sound, captions, hashtags, visible engagement metrics, comment ranking, and algorithmic visibility, allowing conflict narratives to be produced, remixed, commented on, redistributed, and emotionally amplified as entertainment, satire, and participatory visual culture.

This study examines Lego-style animations circulated by Explosive Media on Instagram. Explosive Media is treated as a public creator account that consistently publishes Lego-style digital animations about geopolitical conflict, military confrontation, humanitarian suffering, religious symbolism, and regional resistance narratives. The study does not claim verified institutional affiliation between the account and any state, political organization, or military body. The term propaganda is used analytically to describe the recurring visual-rhetorical organization of enemies, victims, moral claims, military action,

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historical memory, and credibility claims, while the account's institutional affiliation and exact production workflow remain treated with caution.

The account's videos translate political leaders, military conflict, humanitarian grief, sacred symbolism, and historical memory into miniature and entertainment-oriented forms. Political opponents become comic characters, warfare is represented through games, music, scores, and spectacular destruction, and humanitarian narratives are communicated through childhood-coded imagery such as children, classrooms, backpacks, and unfinished play. Although the corpus includes Palestine, Lebanon, Israel, Yemen, and regional resistance themes, these materials are examined as part of Explosive Media's broader Iran-centered framing of geopolitical confrontation and resistance rather than as separate conflict cases.

This phenomenon matters for communication studies because it shows how contemporary propaganda can operate through playful visual form rather than explicit ideological instruction alone. Lego-style animation does not simply make conflict easier to watch; it changes the communicative form of conflict. Leaders, weapons, cities, victims, and infrastructures are miniaturized into familiar toy-like figures and settings. Violence is distanced from graphic realism, while moral claims are compressed into repeatable signs, slogans, hooks, and emotional sequences. This raises a theoretical puzzle: how can an aesthetic associated with toys, childhood, play, and popular entertainment carry messages of humiliation, sacred memory, revenge, and war?

Previous studies have examined political memes as satire and participation (Sandu, 2024), synthetic political media in relation to authenticity and epistemic trust (Twomey et al., 2023), audience redistribution as endorsement, reinterpretation, or opposition (Matalon et al., 2021), and short-form political communication through visual design, emotion, music, captions, and platform-specific resources (Angulo Moncayo et al., 2025; Widholm et al., 2024). However, less attention has been given to how toy-like animation combines meme logic, audiovisual storytelling, political affect, and visible commenter participation within a single repeatable platform object.

This article asks: How do Lego-style animations transform the visual form and platform circulation of propaganda in Instagram conflict narratives? To answer this question, the study uses qualitative multimodal analysis of selected Explosive Media videos, supported by visible engagement indicators, anonymized top-ranked comments, and publicly available creator interview materials as paratextual evidence. Comments are treated as self-selected and platform-ranked interpretations rather than representative evidence of audience opinion.

The study proposes a two-level conceptual distinction. Toy-like propaganda refers to the visual-rhetorical form through which conflict is represented using miniature, playful, and childhood-coded imagery. Meme-based affective warfare refers to the wider circulation process through which these representations acquire political meaning through humor, music, grief, sacred memory, credibility claims, repetition, and visible commenter participation. Through this distinction, the article contributes to communication scholarship by explaining how playful visual form, platform engagement, and political affect interact in contemporary digital propaganda. The study is also relevant to Indonesia and other Global South media environments, where geopolitical conflicts are increasingly encountered through social media fragments, memes, translated captions, short videos, and emotionally charged visual narratives.

Methodology

This study employed an interpretive qualitative design using multimodal analysis supported by descriptive engagement data. The unit of analysis was the Instagram video as a platform object, consisting of moving images, editing, sound, captions, hashtags, visible text, engagement indicators, and selected comments. The study focused on communicative form and platform circulation rather than on verifying the factual accuracy of the political claims presented in the videos.

Explosive Media was selected as the case because it consistently publishes Lego-style digital animations about geopolitical conflict, military confrontation, humanitarian suffering, religious symbolism, and regional resistance narratives. The account was considered analytically relevant because it repeatedly combines toy-like visual form, meme logic, music, political accusation, and visible audience participation within Instagram Reels. The study does not claim verified institutional affiliation between Explosive Media and any state, military institution, or political organization.

Data collection was finalized through an account snapshot in July 2026. From 174 visible Instagram posts, 56 Lego-style videos relevant to political, wartime, religious, historical, or media narratives were retained. The inclusion criteria were: publicly accessible Instagram posts from Explosive Media; video/Reels format; Lego-style or toy-like animation; relevance to geopolitical conflict or regional resistance narratives; and availability of multimodal elements such as visual scenes, captions, sound, hashtags, or comments. Posts were excluded when they were non-video materials, unrelated to political or conflict narratives, did not use Lego-style animation, or lacked sufficient multimodal material for analysis.

The retained 56 videos were first mapped to identify recurring narrative and visual patterns. Stratified purposive sampling then selected 36 core cases based on thematic relevance, format variation, visual richness, and representation across the main content clusters. From these, 18 information-rich cases were selected for detailed multimodal comparison. The descriptive clusters used for sampling were treated as corpus-mapping categories, while the five higher-order mechanisms reported in the findings were developed inductively through iterative comparison of the 36 core cases and close analysis of the 18 deep cases.

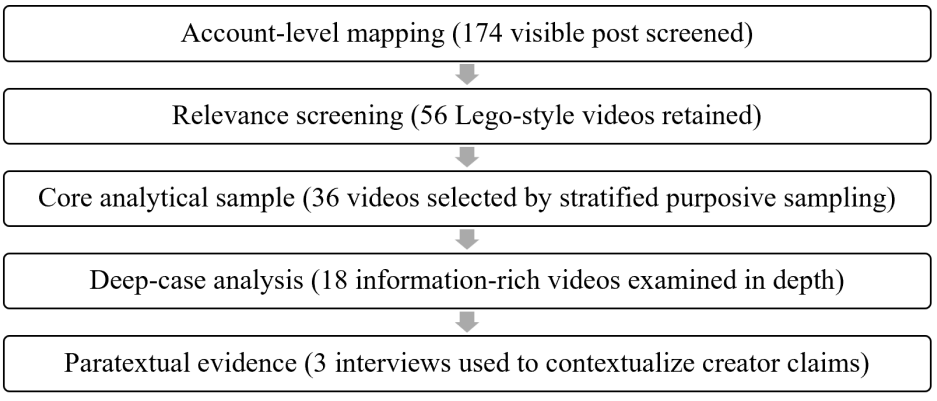


Figure 1. Multi-stage sampling funnel from 174 visible posts to deep-case analysis and paratextual interviews (Source: Authors' elaboration based on the research dataset)

The coding framework covered six dimensions: narrative framing, visual symbolism, meme strategy, affective tone, visible comment reception, and engagement. Each deep case was examined across video scenes, visible text, sound or music, captions, hashtags, and top-ranked comments. Where relevant, the analysis traced how specific scenes connected toy-like figures, military objects, religious or historical symbols, meme captions, and affective cues. This procedure was used to identify how Lego-style animation organized enemy images, victimhood, moral claims, retaliation, credibility claims, and audience participation.

To make the multimodal procedure transparent, Table 1 provides an illustrative scene-level transcription from one deep case. The table does not represent all videos, but demonstrates how visual, textual, audio, and comment layers were connected during analysis.

Table 1. Illustrative multimodal transcription from B1-02

Analytical layer	Observed element	Analytical interpretation
Visual scene	Lego-style Trump figure is placed in a staged, toy-like setting associated with defeat and ridicule.	The political opponent is miniaturized and transformed into a visually controllable comic figure.
On-screen text	Labels such as “L.O.S.E.R” and “LIAR” appear as short, repeatable signs.	Political criticism is compressed into meme-like moral labels rather than extended argument.
Narrative action	The figure is framed as having played his “final card” and becoming politically disposable.	The video constructs enemy humiliation through failure, exposure, and symbolic defeat.
Sound / music	The sequence uses entertainment-oriented rhythm and replayable audiovisual pacing.	Music supports repetition and makes the insult circulate as a memorable affective hook.
Caption / framing	The caption reinforces the interpretation of political failure and defeat.	Caption and image work together to stabilize the humiliation frame.
Visible comments	Some top-ranked comments praise the visual details, repeat the insult, describe the video as trolling, or request music distribution.	Commenters extend the humiliation frame and help make it repeatable, legible, and platform-compatible.

Engagement indicators were treated as platform-derived secondary data. They were not used to measure persuasion or audience agreement, but to contextualize visibility and circulation. Descriptive engagement was calculated from visible likes, comments, and shares, while engagement rate was calculated as total interactions divided by views × 100. Because Instagram metrics are time-bound, rounded, and platform-dependent, these figures are interpreted as descriptive snapshots rather than precise measures of communicative effects.

Visible top-ranked comments were grouped descriptively into six reception categories: support, questioning or rejection, symbol decoding, translation or music requests,

credibility claims, and narrative extension. Because Instagram comment ranking is dynamic and the comments were selected purposively rather than randomly, the distribution was reported descriptively rather than statistically. Comments appeared mainly in English, with some Arabic/Persian terms, emojis, flags, and religious expressions retained as symbolic cues. Non-English comments were interpreted through visible context and translation support, and were not used as verified factual claims.

Publicly available creator interview materials were used as paratextual evidence. They were not treated as direct research interviews conducted by the authors. Instead, they were analyzed as public self-presentations that help contextualize how the creator team frames Lego-style animation, political storytelling, and audience engagement. Claims from these materials were not accepted as transparent evidence of intention, but read as part of the account's broader communicative framing.

This study does not make a forensic claim about the exact AI tools used to produce each video. The term "AI-generated" is used cautiously to refer to the account's self-presentation, the synthetic visual style of the videos, and the broader generative-media context in which such content circulates. The analysis focuses on communicative form, visual rhetoric, and platform circulation rather than technical authorship.

To strengthen interpretive trustworthiness, the videos were reviewed repeatedly across visual, textual, audio, and comment layers. Ambiguous cases and counter-readings were compared across the corpus, while the coding notes were reviewed through peer debriefing between the authors. Only publicly accessible materials were analyzed; usernames were anonymized, and political, military, casualty, and media-deception claims were treated as narrative frames unless independently verified.

Table 2. Operational codebook used for multimodal and reception analysis

Dimension	Inclusion criterion	Exclusion criterion	Illustrative example
Narrative frame	Defines conflict, enemy, victim, and moral position	Purely decorative elements without narrative function	Iran as defender; US leader as liar/loser
Visual symbolism	Recurring objects, settings, figures, flags, maps, weapons, children's items	Background details with no recurring or contextual significance	Backpack as child-victim motif
Meme strategy	Labels, hooks, parody, punchlines, game references, serialization	General editing choices without repeatable memetic function	"Noob," scoreboards, L.O.S.E.R
Affective tone	Dominant emotional invitation expressed across image, sound, and caption	Researcher emotion unsupported by textual or visual cues	Ridicule, grief, sacred hope, triumph
Visible comment reception	Top-ranked comments that decode, support, question, request, or contest	Factual claims treated as verified evidence	Music requests; media distrust; counter-reading
Engagement	Views, likes, comments, shares, total interactions, ER when views available	Inference of persuasion or attitude change	ER = interactions / views × 100

(Source: Authors' coding framework)

The six coding dimensions in Table 2 were used as initial analytical lenses. The five mechanisms reported in the Results were not predetermined categories, but higher-order patterns developed through iterative comparison of the coded cases. Table 3 presents the 18 deep cases selected from the 36 core videos for detailed multimodal analysis. The table reports each video code, main cluster, views, total engagement, and engagement rate. The sample was not selected to represent the entire audience statistically, but to provide information-rich cases across different narrative clusters, visual forms, and circulation patterns. Engagement indicators are included as descriptive platform data to contextualize visibility and interaction, not as evidence of persuasion or audience agreement.

Table 3. Deep-case sample and engagement profile (n = 18)

Video code	Main cluster	Views	Total engagement	ER (%)
B1-02	Trump/US humiliation	264,000	24,400	9.24
B2-11	Palestine football solidarity	18,100	2,228	12.31
B3-11	Lebanon anti-disarmament	46,400	4,248	9.16
B5-04	Reality-vs-delusion satire	24,200	2,270	9.38
B7-06	Hormuz /oil geopolitics	98,300	10,877	11.07
B7-07	Deception /false-flag satire	56,100	4,932	8.79
B7-17	War gamification	71,100	7,299	10.27
B8-06	Civilizational history	85,300	6,570	7.70
B8-18	Alternative war-news	145,000	9,216	6.36
B1-03	Global justice /vengeance	213,000	21,300	10.00
B1-05	Sacred mobilization	628,000	81,200	12.93
B4-16	Lebanon Sacred Defense	356,000	38,200	10.73
B6-01	Resistance music/anthem	82,600	9,177	11.11
B6-02	Alternative history classroom	78,200	9,752	12.47
B6-08	Axis Resistance solidarity	192,000	26,609	13.86
B6-16	Rap humiliation /resilience	99,500	5,634	5.66
B8-14	Minab revenge memory	24,700	1,696	6.87
B8-16	Festival militarization	136,000	11,860	8.72

(Source: Authors' analysis based on Instagram engagement data collected in July 2026)

Results

The analysis identified five recurring and overlapping mechanisms: enemy humiliation, geopolitical gamification, sacred and civilizational memory, humanitarian grief linked to retaliatory legitimacy, and alternative-news trust. These mechanisms were developed through iterative comparison of the 36 core cases and close multimodal analysis of the 18 deep cases. They are not mutually exclusive; individual videos often combine ridicule, music, media distrust, sacred memory, humanitarian imagery, regional solidarity, and gaming references. Table 4 summarizes the primary and secondary mechanisms identified across the 18 deep cases. The primary mechanism refers to the dominant narrative function of each video, while secondary mechanisms indicate overlapping functions that support the main mechanism. This table shows that the five mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, but operate in different combinations across the analyzed videos.

Table 4. Primary and secondary mechanisms across the 18 deep cases

Video code	Main cluster	Enemy humiliation	Geopolitical gamification	Sacred / civilizational memory	Humanitarian grief / retaliatory legitimacy	Alternative -news trust
B1-02	Trump / US humiliation	P	S	-	-	-
B2-11	Palestine football solidarity	-	P	S	S	-
B3-11	Lebanon anti-disarmament	S	-	S	P	-
B5-04	Reality-vs-delusion satire	P	-	-	-	S
B7-06	Hormuz / oil geopolitics	-	S	-	-	P
B7-07	Deception / false-flag satire	S	S	-	-	P
B7-17	War gamification	S	P	-	-	-
B8-06	Civilizational history	-	-	P	S	S
B8-18	Alternative war-news	S	-	-	-	P
B1-03	Global justice / vengeance	-	-	S	P	-
B1-05	Sacred mobilization	-	-	P	S	-
B4-16	Lebanon Sacred Defense	S	-	P	S	-
B6-01	Resistance music / anthem	S	-	S	-	P
B6-02	Alternative history classroom	-	-	P	S	S
B6-08	Axis Resistance solidarity	-	-	S	P	S
B6-16	Rap humiliation / resilience	P	S	S	-	-
B8-14	Minab revenge memory	-	-	S	P	-

Video code	Main cluster	Enemy humiliation	Geopolitical gamification	Sacred / civilizational memory	Humanitarian grief / retaliatory legitimacy	Alternative -news trust
B8-16	Festival militarization	-	S	S	P	-

Notes: P = primary mechanism; S = secondary mechanism; "-" = not dominant in the case.
(Source**:** Authors' interpretation based on multimodal comparison of the 18 deep cases)

Enemy Humiliation and Political Ridicule

Enemy humiliation is one of the most visible mechanisms in the corpus. In B1-02, Trump is framed as a failed card player who has played his final card and become politically disposable. The recurring signs "L.O.S.E.R" and "LIAR" compress political criticism into short meme signifiers. Rather than developing a detailed policy argument against the United States, the video organizes criticism through personal and moral degradation. Trump is represented as ridiculous, deceptive, and publicly defeated.

B5-04 develops a more epistemic form of humiliation through the contrast between "Trump's Victory Delusion" and "But Reality." This opposition represents Trump not only as a comic target but also as a political actor whose account of events is incompatible with the version of reality supplied by the video. B6-16 extends humiliation into musical seriality through the repeated L.O.S.E.R hook, casino imagery, scandal references, and scenes of military defeat.

The toy-like form matters here because Lego-style figures reduce political leaders into simplified, miniature, and visually controllable characters. Limited facial expressions, block-like bodies, and staged toy settings make ridicule visually immediate. The opponent is not only criticized; he is miniaturized, handled, and made laughable within a playful scene. This transformation distinguishes toy-like humiliation from ordinary verbal insult or political cartooning: the enemy becomes a small, repeatable figure whose defeat can be watched, replayed, and circulated as entertainment. Visible comments extended this frame through repeated insults, praise for visual details, trolling interpretations, and music requests.

Geopolitical Gamification and Playable Conflict

A second mechanism is geopolitical gamification. In B7-17, the insult "Noob" draws from gaming culture. Trump and the United States are positioned as incompetent players who fail through Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. White flags, scoreboards, missiles, aircraft carriers, and a concluding USA–Iran score transform military conflict into a competitive spectacle with assigned winners and losers. The video does not explain the conflict in detail; it stages the conflict as a game that Iran has already won.

B2-11 provides a different form of gamification by translating Palestine solidarity through football symbolism. The caption asks viewers to interpret the number 72. Visible commenters offered different readings, including football-related Palestine solidarity and religious interpretations connected to Karbala memory. In this case, football does not only create comedy; it becomes a familiar cultural language through which geopolitical solidarity becomes emotionally accessible.

The Lego-style aesthetic strengthens gamification because it makes war appear as a constructed scene or playable set. Weapons, flags, stadiums, leaders, and crowds appear as modular objects that can be arranged into a clear winner–loser sequence. The toy-like form therefore does more than simplify conflict. It gives conflict a procedural and game-like

grammar: players act, plans fail, scores appear, and defeat becomes visible. This helps transform geopolitical confrontation into a platform-friendly spectacle.

Visible comments supported this reading through lyric repetition, explanation of gaming terms, soundtrack requests, and political interpretation. Entertainment-oriented responses coexisted with ideological readings, showing how play and politics operate together within the same platform object.

Sacred Memory, Civilizational History, and Popular Pedagogy

The corpus also demonstrates that Lego-style propaganda is not exclusively comic. Several videos rely on sacred affect, historical memory, and popular pedagogy. B1-05, the "We Must Rise" video, shifts from satire toward devotional mobilization. Shrine-like imagery, green flags, processional scenes, horse-and-rider symbolism, and Mahdist references create a sacred atmosphere. Visible comments contained prayers, tears, Mahdist references, Hussaini memory, and expressions of Iranian national pride.

B4-16 links contemporary conflict with the language of sacred defense. Through "No More Talks," Lebanese flags, ruined cities, civilian suffering, and final "Sacred Defense" branding, the video represents diplomacy as exhausted and resistance as morally necessary. B8-06 and B6-02 develop civilizational pedagogy. B8-06 represents Iran or Persia as a historically deep civilization, while B6-02 uses a classroom setting, a teacher, schoolchildren, references to 1953, sanctions, propaganda, Islamophobia, and child-victim imagery to stage an alternative history lesson.

The toy-like form matters because it turns sacred and historical memory into accessible miniature scenes. Classrooms, processions, flags, horses, ruined cities, and children are arranged as recognizable symbolic sets. This makes complex histories portable and visually teachable. At the same time, the childhood-coded form creates a tension: the toy-like aesthetic softens access to difficult historical and religious material while carrying solemn ideological claims about sacrifice, resistance, and civilizational endurance.

Visible comments often described these videos as "truth," "history class," "textbook correction," or emotional education. Other comments challenged parts of the framing, indicating that visible reception was not uniform. The videos therefore functioned not simply as entertainment, but as popular pedagogy: they invited viewers to remember, reinterpret, and contest history through miniature visual storytelling.

Humanitarian Grief, Revenge, and Moral Conversion

Another recurring mechanism is the connection between humanitarian grief and retaliatory legitimacy. B1-03 represents Iran as a symbolic avenger for victims of historical violence. The caption invokes crimes against humanity, silenced voices, and children whose play was left unfinished, ending with the slogan "ONE VENGEANCE FOR ALL." Visible comments connected the video with Palestine, Latin America, Malcolm X, Rachel Corrie, Indigenous memory, and other histories of victimization.

B8-14 concentrates this mechanism through child-victim imagery. The video moves from classroom and backpack motifs to military command, missile launches, explosions, and global economic consequences. The sequence constructs a moral chain in which children suffer, grief becomes collective, and military response is represented as morally justified. B8-16 extends this connection through Chaharshanbe Suri, remixing an Iranian

fire celebration into a wartime music video in which cultural fire becomes a metaphor for retaliation.

The Lego-style form is central to this mechanism because it uses childhood-coded imagery to make suffering visually approachable while avoiding graphic realism. Children, backpacks, classrooms, hospitals, ruined cities, and unfinished play create empathy without showing realistic bodily violence. Yet this same visual distance can also make retaliation appear emotionally acceptable. The toy-like form therefore performs a moral conversion: grief is miniaturized, made viewable, and then connected to revenge, sacred defense, or national pride.

This mechanism is ethically complex. The analysis does not treat these images as verified evidence of events. It treats them as visual structures in which suffering is narratively linked to the moral justification of retaliatory action. Visible comments showed empathy, solidarity, music requests, translation requests, and national pride, indicating that humanitarian grief could circulate simultaneously as mourning, entertainment, and political mobilization.

Alternative-News Trust and Visible Commenter Participation

The fifth mechanism concerns alternative-news trust. Several videos present themselves as corrections to mainstream, Western, or official narratives. B7-07 uses the phrase "What actually happened" and concludes with "Operation Epic Deception." A water-gun scene and staged-event reveal transform an official-looking incident into comic deception. Some visible commenters interpreted the video as more believable than official narratives, connected it with wider media distrust, or extended its claims into speculation.

B8-18 uses a Lego-style breaking-news format around "Black Friday" and an alleged US military failure. Military aircraft, explosions, emergency scenes, soldiers, and dramatic war-news aesthetics give the animation the appearance of a compact news report. Some visible commenters described Lego news as more trustworthy than Western media, while others rejected the post as propaganda. This coexistence of supportive and critical readings shows that visible reception did not depend on unanimous agreement.

The toy-like form contributes to alternative-news trust in a paradoxical way. Its playful form can make the content appear less institutional and therefore less associated with official propaganda, even while it advances strong political claims. The Lego-style scene creates distance from conventional news seriousness, but it also offers a simplified and coherent alternative explanation. In this sense, the toy-like aesthetic can function as both entertainment and credibility work.

Across the corpus, comments were not merely secondary reaction data. Commenters decoded numbers, explained symbols, requested subtitles, asked for songs, repeated slogans, compared animations with news, challenged interpretations, and requested subsequent episodes. These practices constitute visible interpretive labor because they help make the videos legible, repeatable, and contestable within the platform.

Descriptive Engagement Patterns

Descriptive engagement statistics contextualize rather than validate the qualitative interpretations. The 18 deep cases recorded substantial visible activity, but views, likes, comments, and shares were treated as time-bound platform indicators, not evidence of persuasion. The strongest engagement patterns appeared in videos combining regional solidarity, sacred mobilization, music, and repeatable signs. These patterns show that

entertainment-oriented reception, political interpretation, and credibility claims can coexist without implying uniform audience agreement.

Discussion

The findings show that Lego-style animation does not merely decorate political propaganda; it reorganizes the visual form through which conflict becomes viewable, repeatable, and emotionally manageable. Toy-like propaganda refers to a visual-rhetorical form in which adult political conflict is represented through miniature, playful, and childhood-coded imagery. It operates through four properties: miniaturization, visual distance from graphic realism, ideological compression, and platform portability.

Miniaturization turns leaders, weapons, victims, cities, and infrastructures into small and visually controllable forms. Visual distance replaces graphic realism with toy-like figures and simplified settings, making violence less bodily and more symbolic. Ideological compression reduces complex conflict into recognizable heroes, villains, slogans, scores, flags, and moral sequences. Platform portability allows these signs to travel through short videos, musical hooks, captions, replayable scenes, and comments.

This distinguishes toy-like propaganda from political cartoons, animated propaganda, gamified political communication, and memes. Enemy humiliation, gamification, sacred memory, grief, and alternative-news trust could appear in other media formats, but the Lego-style form makes them miniature, visually playable, and easily repeatable.

The second contribution is the distinction between toy-like propaganda as visual-rhetorical form and meme-based affective warfare as circulation process. The videos do not operate only through explicit political argument. They work through humor, music, grief, sacred memory, credibility claims, and visible commenter participation. Political meaning is produced not only by the video itself, but also by how commenters decode numbers, repeat lyrics, request translations, praise songs, challenge claims, compare animations with news, and request further episodes. These practices resemble participatory and sometimes oppositional forms of political commenting, message redistribution, and citizen response to propaganda (Gammon & Phan, 2024; Kalmoe et al., 2022; Matalon et al., 2021).

However, visible comments do not represent the audience as a whole. They function as a platform-ranked reception layer that makes certain interpretations more visible, repeatable, and contestable. In this sense, meme-based affective warfare is not simply the use of memes in conflict. It refers to the platform circulation of emotionally charged political signs through entertainment forms, repeated hooks, symbolic decoding, and visible participation. This distinction also explains why engagement indicators should be read cautiously. They contextualize visibility and interaction, but they do not measure persuasion, ideological conversion, or representative audience agreement.

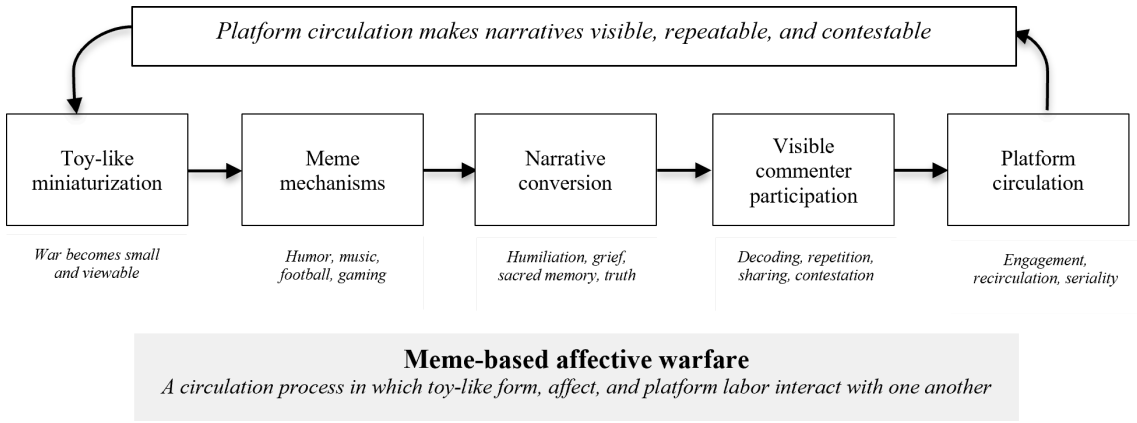


Figure 2. Conceptual circulation model of toy-like propaganda and meme-based affective warfare (Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the study findings)

Figure 2 summarizes the conceptual relationship between toy-like miniaturization, meme mechanisms, narrative conversion, visible commenter participation, and platform circulation. The model should be read as an analytical synthesis of the observed cases, not as evidence that comments or engagement metrics directly shape subsequent production.

The findings reveal four tensions. First, Lego-style imagery moves between humanization and trivialization. It can make civilian suffering approachable by avoiding graphic realism. Children, backpacks, classrooms, hospitals, ruined cities, and unfinished play invite empathy without showing bodily violence. However, the same visual distance can also transform destruction into spectacle. Toy-like propaganda may humanize selected victims while reducing selected opponents into comic, deceptive, or immoral figures.

Second, it moves between participation and manipulation. Commenters actively decode symbols, extend narratives, request subtitles, ask for songs, repeat slogans, and challenge claims. Yet participation is not the same as deliberation. Instagram comment ranking, supporter concentration, repeated slogans, and possible coordinated behavior may shape which interpretations become most visible. The study therefore treats comments as visible interpretive labor, not as evidence of audience consensus.

Third, it moves between entertainment and credibility. Some commenters receive the videos as jokes, songs, "bangers," or visually impressive animations, while others describe them as truth, history, or news. This matters because perceived credibility in conflict-related information can be shaped by narrative consistency, conflict involvement, blame attribution, and trust in different media types (Bryanov et al., 2023; Dal et al., 2025). Music further extends the temporal life of the message. Requests for songs, albums, translations, and repeatable lyrics show how political messages can become replayable cultural objects, consistent with research on multimodal platform features and the convergence of fan practices with political participation (Driessen et al., 2024; Widholm et al., 2024).

Fourth, toy-like propaganda operates within asymmetrical symbolic conflict. Explosive Media represents US and allied figures as incompetent, deceptive, or morally defeated while presenting regional resistance as emotionally unified. However, this should not be reduced to a simple opposition between weak and powerful actors, because states and movements in the region also possess their own media and propaganda infrastructures. The more precise claim is that Lego-style animation provides a creator-centered, musical, serialized, and meme-oriented way to compete over narrative visibility, political

legitimacy, and counter-narrative production in digital conflict environments (Marigliano et al., 2024; Wolfsfeld, 2018; Woolley, 2016).

A further implication concerns the Lego-style aesthetic itself. Lego is globally associated with Western consumer culture, childhood play, modular creativity, and entertainment. In this corpus, however, a Lego-like visual language is used to ridicule the United States and support anti-Western or resistance-oriented narratives. This creates an important irony: a globally recognizable Western-coded toy aesthetic is repurposed to challenge Western symbolic authority. The practice can be understood as a form of culture jamming, where familiar popular-cultural forms are redirected toward counter-hegemonic messaging. The result is not simply anti-Western messaging, but anti-Western messaging delivered through a globally recognizable Western-coded visual form.

The issue of AI also requires careful framing. This study does not forensically verify the exact production tools used in each video. Therefore, the argument does not depend on proving which generative AI software produced the content. The relevant communication question is how synthetic-looking Lego-style imagery organizes emotional cues, credibility claims, repetition, and platform circulation. Research on deepfakes and synthetic media shows that digitally produced media can raise questions of epistemic trust, while studies of AI framing and generative political art describe AI as part of broader infrastructures of cultural production, political power, representation, memory, satire, and ideological bias (Farias Mota, 2026; Kendre et al., 2026; Twomey et al., 2023). In this study, AI is therefore treated as a context of visual production and circulation, while the main focus remains communicative function rather than technical authorship.

The theoretical implication is that digital propaganda should not be analyzed only through message content, source intention, or factual verification. It also needs to be understood through visual form, affective design, platform circulation, and visible audience labor. For media literacy, especially in Indonesia and other Global South media environments, factual verification remains important but insufficient. Users also need to understand how aesthetics, sound, humor, repetition, childhood-coded imagery, and platform ranking shape political interpretation. A playful visual form may carry a dense moral architecture, while a humorous post may invite both skepticism and trust. Thus, the contribution of this study is to shift attention from whether digital images are technically authentic to how they work communicatively.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This study has several limitations. It is based on a single case study of Explosive Media, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Instagram users, Iranian media, or digital propaganda. Visible comments are treated as self-selected and platform-ranked interpretations, not as representative audience opinion or evidence of persuasion. Engagement indicators are also time-bound platform data, not measures of influence or attitude change. The study does not verify factual claims in the videos, captions, or comments, nor does it forensically identify the AI tools used. Religious, historical, Persian/Arabic, and regional symbols were interpreted cautiously through visible textual cues, captions, comments, and contextual cross-checking. Only publicly accessible materials were analyzed; usernames were anonymized and private accounts were not accessed.

Conclusion

This study asked how Lego-style animations transform the visual form and platform circulation of propaganda in Instagram conflict narratives. The answer lies in the interaction between toy-like form and meme-based circulation. Lego-style animation transforms propaganda by miniaturizing political conflict, distancing violence from graphic realism, compressing ideology into recognizable signs, and making conflict narratives portable through music, captions, humor, repetition, and visible commenter participation.

The findings identify five overlapping mechanisms: enemy humiliation, geopolitical gamification, sacred and civilizational memory, humanitarian grief linked to retaliatory legitimacy, and alternative-news credibility claims. These mechanisms show that Lego-style animation can function simultaneously as entertainment, political accusation, historical interpretation, popular pedagogy, and alternative-news framing.

The main conceptual contribution is the distinction between toy-like propaganda and meme-based affective warfare. Toy-like propaganda names the visual-rhetorical form that turns adult political conflict into miniature, playable, and emotionally manageable scenes. Meme-based affective warfare names the circulation process through which humor, music, grief, sacred memory, credibility claims, and visible commenter participation make those scenes repeatable, contestable, and politically meaningful.

The study also shows that playful political media contains an ethical contradiction. Lego-style imagery may make selected victims more approachable while reducing opponents to comic, deceptive, or immoral figures. It can invite empathy and trivialize violence at the same time. Therefore, playful visual form should not be treated as politically harmless.

Future research can extend this study through audience reception beyond visible comments, cross-platform comparison, and production-focused research on AI-assisted animation workflows.

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