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Review

# A Comprehensive and Critical Literature Review on Framing Theory in the Digital Media Age

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**Abstract:** This literature review provides a comprehensive analysis of framing theory in the context of digital media over the past 20 years by drawing on approximately 60 studies. Framing theory, which explains how media presentation influences audience interpretation, has evolved significantly with the rise of digital platforms, such as social media, online news, and user-generated content. The key themes explored included the participatory nature of framing on social media, the impact of algorithmic curation, the intersection of framing with misinformation, cross-cultural dynamics, and methodological challenges in studying digital framing. One notable aspect of the review is its examination of the role social media plays in public opinion formation, emphasizing how users not only consume but also actively contribute to the framing processes. Algorithmic framing, where automated systems influence the prominence and visibility of certain frames, is another critical area of focus. The review also delves into how misinformation can be framed to either enhance or undermine its credibility, presenting a complex challenge for researchers and practitioners alike. Additionally, the review highlights the cultural and methodological complexities involved in studying framing across different digital environments, noting that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient. By identifying critical gaps such as the need for more longitudinal studies and cross-cultural research, the review proposes future directions for advancing framing theory in an increasingly fragmented and digital media landscape.

**Keywords:** framing theory; digital media; social media; algorithmic framing; misinformation; cross-cultural framing

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## Introduction

Framing theory, first conceptualized by Goffman (1974) as a sociological construct and later adapted to communication studies by Entman (1993), posits that the way information is presented—or "framed"—shapes how audiences perceive and interpret reality. In traditional media, framing is largely controlled by journalists and editors, who act as gatekeepers, selecting the aspects of a story to emphasize (Scheufele, 1999). However, the advent of digital media has fundamentally altered this dynamic by introducing a participatory, multi-directional communication environment in which users, algorithms, and influencers co-construct narratives (Cacciatore et al., 2016). The digital media age, characterized by platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok as well as the proliferation of online news and blogs, has expanded the scope of framing theory to include new actors, technologies, and challenges such as misinformation and algorithmic bias.

This literature review synthesizes approximately 60 studies from the past two decades (2005–2025) to explore how framing theory has adapted to the digital era. It examined key thematic developments, including the role of social media in public opinion formation, the influence of algorithmic framing, the intersection of framing with misinformation, and the cultural and methodological complexities of studying framing in a fragmented media landscape. By critically evaluating the existing research, identifying gaps, and proposing future directions, this review aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of framing theory in the digital age.

## Methodology

This review was conducted through a systematic search of academic databases, such as PubMed, JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Keywords used included "framing theory," "digital media framing," "social media framing," "algorithmic framing," and "misinformation framing." The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles, books, and conference papers published between 2005 and 2025, to capture the evolution of the digital media era. Studies were selected based on their relevance to framing theory and digital media, resulting in a corpus of approximately 60 sources. The analysis focused on thematic trends, theoretical advancements, methodological approaches, and critical gaps in literature. Qualitative and quantitative studies were included to ensure a comprehensive perspective.

## Thematic Analysis

### *1. Framing Theory: Foundations and Evolution*

Framing theory has emerged as a critical framework for understanding media effects, with early work focusing on how traditional media outlets shape public perception by emphasizing certain aspects of reality over others (Entman, 1993). Entman (1993) defined framing as the process of selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text" (p. 52), thereby influencing audience interpretation. Initial studies explored framing in contexts such as political campaigns, war reporting, and health crises, often highlighting the power of media elites to construct dominant narratives (Scheufele, 1999). For example, Iyengar (1991) demonstrated how episodic versus thematic framing of poverty in television news influences whether audiences attribute responsibility to individuals or systemic factors. The transition to digital media has necessitated the reconceptualization of framing theory to account for the interactive and decentralized nature of online communication. Borah (2011) argues that digital platforms introduce "frame multiplicity," where multiple, often conflicting frames coexist and evolve in real time, challenging the linear, top-down models of traditional framing. Unlike traditional media, where frames are relatively stable and controlled by a limited number of gatekeepers, digital media allow for rapid frame diffusion and contestation (Cacciatore et al., 2016). This shift has prompted scholars to explore how framing operates in a context where audiences are not just passive receivers but also active participants in frame construction.

Moreover, the digital age has blurred the boundaries between framing and related theories, such as agenda-setting and priming. While agenda-setting focuses on what issues are deemed important and priming on how prior exposure influences subsequent judgments, framing emphasizes how issues are presented (Weaver, 2007). In digital media, these processes often overlap, as algorithms and user interactions simultaneously determine salience and interpretation (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). This convergence underscores the need for an integrated theoretical framework that captures the multifaceted nature of media effects in the digital era.

### *2. Social Media as a Framing Tool*

Social media platforms have become central to framing processes by transforming users into both consumer and producer frames. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and, more recently, TikTok enable individuals and organizations to craft and disseminate frames at unprecedented speed and scale (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Research has highlighted how social media facilitates participatory framing, where collective action and user engagement shape public discourse on issues ranging from climate change to social justice. For instance, Harlow and Harp (2012) examined how activist movements in the United States and Latin America used social media to frame issues such as gender equality and political reform, finding that emotionally resonant frames—often amplified through hashtags and viral content—significantly increased engagement and offline mobilization. Specific events, such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, illustrate the power of social media framing. Studies have shown that hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter serve as framing devices, encapsulating narratives of systemic racism and police brutality while

fostering a sense of global solidarity (Freelon et al., 2016). Jackson and Foucault Welles (2016) further noted that marginalized voices, often excluded from traditional media, gained prominence through social media framing, challenging dominant narratives, and creating counter-frames. However, the echo chamber effect poses a significant challenge, as users are often exposed to reinforcing frames that align with their pre-existing beliefs, leading to polarization (Sunstein, 2017). Barberá et al. (2015) found that political discussions on Twitter often cluster into ideologically homogeneous groups, limiting exposure to diverse frames and exacerbating societal divide.

Additionally, the roles of influencers and opinion leaders in framing cannot be overlooked. Influencers with their large followings often act as frame setters, leveraging personal branding to shape narratives on issues such as health, politics, and consumer behavior (Abidin, 2018). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, influencers framed public health measures in ways that either supported or undermined official guidelines, demonstrating their significant impact on public perceptions (Cinelli et al., 2020). This democratization of framing while empowering also raises concerns about accountability and the potential for misinformation, as discussed in later sections.

### *3. Algorithmic Framing and Personalization*

The rise of algorithmic curation on digital platforms has introduced a new dimension to framing theory, in which machine learning systems play a central role in determining which frames users encounter. Platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, use algorithms to prioritize content based on user preferences, engagement metrics, and behavioral data, often amplifying sensational or emotionally charged frames to maximize clicks and time spent (Bucher, 2018). Pariser (2011) introduced the concept of the "filter bubble," arguing that algorithmic personalization creates insular information environments where users are exposed primarily to frames that reinforce their existing beliefs, thus limiting cognitive diversity. Recent research has explored the opaque nature of algorithmic framing, highlighting how a lack of transparency complicates accountability. Diakopoulos (2019) argues that algorithms are not neutral; they embed the biases of their creators and the data on which they are trained, often perpetuating stereotypes or marginalizing certain perspectives. For instance, studies have shown that YouTube's recommendation algorithm disproportionately promotes far-right content by framing it as "alternative" or "controversial," thereby amplifying divisive narratives (Lewis, 2018). Similarly, Tufekci (2018) warns of "computational propaganda," where algorithms are exploited by malicious actors to frame misinformation as credible, influencing public opinion during critical events such as elections.

The ethical implications of algorithmic framing are significant. Ward (2018) suggested that the lack of user control over algorithmic curation raises questions about autonomy and informed decision-making. Moreover, the personalization of frames can erode shared public discourse as individuals encounter increasingly fragmented versions of reality (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). While some scholars advocate greater algorithmic transparency and regulation (Gillespie, 2018), others caution that such interventions must balance innovation with user privacy (Zuboff, 2019). This tension remains a critical topic for future research.

### *4. Misinformation and Framing in the Digital Age*

The proliferation of misinformation on digital platforms has become a pressing concern, and framing strategies are often exploited to make false or misleading information more persuasive. Lewandowsky et al. (2012) argued that misinformation is frequently framed in ways that align with cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, making it more likely to be accepted and shared. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, competing frames about vaccines, ranging from conspiracy theories to scientific endorsements, circulated widely on social media, often undermining public health efforts (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2020). Studies suggest that anti-vaccine frames, often emphasizing personal freedom or distrust in institutions, resonate strongly with certain demographics, illustrating the power of emotionally charged framing (Kata, 2012). The emergence of "deepfakes" and manipulated media further complicate the landscape of digital framing. Paris and



Donovan (2019) highlighted how fabricated audio and visual content can be framed as authentic, deceiving audiences, and shaping perceptions of reality. For instance, fake videos of political figures have been used to frame events in ways that incite outrage or confusion, raising concerns about trust in digital media (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Addressing misinformation requires not only technological solutions such as fact-checking algorithms but also a deeper understanding of how framing influences belief formation and persistence (Ecker et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the speed and scale of misinformation dissemination on digital platforms exacerbates its impact. Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news spreads six times faster than true news on Twitter, often because of novelty and emotional framing. This phenomenon underscores the need for framing theory to account for the viral nature of digital content and the psychological mechanisms that drive sharing behaviors. Interventions such as prebooking—exposing users to weakened versions of misinformation frames to build resistance—show promise, but require further testing across diverse contexts (van der Linden, 2022).

### *5. Cross-Cultural and Global Perspectives on Digital Framing*

While much of the research on digital framing focuses on Western contexts, a growing body of literature emphasizes the role of cultural factors in shaping the framing processes. Lee and Oh (2013) found that the framing of health-related issues on social media varies significantly between collectivist and individualist cultures, with the former emphasizing community responsibility and the latter personal choices. Similarly, Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2019) highlight how cultural values influence the framing of climate change, with Eastern audiences being more receptive to frames of collective action compared to Western audiences. Global events, such as the Arab Spring, demonstrate the transnational potential of digital framing, while also revealing cultural nuances. Howard and Hussain (2013) argued that social media platforms enabled activists to frame the uprisings as a fight for democracy, resonating with global audiences and garnering international support. However, local interpretations of these frames vary, shaped by historical, political, and linguistic contexts (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2014). This suggests that, while digital media can transcend borders, cultural filters mediate the reception and impact of frames.

Despite these insights, cross-cultural research on digital framing has remained limited. Most studies have focused on English-language content, neglecting non-Western platforms such as WeChat or VKontakte, which host distinct framing dynamics (Yang, 2016). Additionally, linguistic barriers and varying platform affordances complicate comparative analyses (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Future research should prioritize multilingual and multiplatform studies to capture the global diversity of digital framing practices.

### *6. Methodological Challenges and Innovations*

Studying framing in the digital media age presents unique methodological challenges owing to the volume, velocity, and variety of data. Traditional content analysis, while effective for small-scale studies of print or broadcast media, struggles to keep pace with the real-time user-driven nature of digital content (Baden & Lecheler, 2012). Consequently, computational methods such as natural language processing (NLP), machine learning, and network analysis have gained prominence in framing research. For instance, Tsur and Rappoport (2015) used NLP to detect framing biases in political tweets and identified the linguistic patterns associated with partisan narratives. However, computational approaches have limitations. Grimmer and Stewart (2013) note that automated content analysis often lacks the nuance of capturing contextual meaning or cultural subtleties, potentially oversimplifying complex frames. Moreover, reliance on big data raises ethical concerns regarding privacy and consent, particularly when analyzing user-generated content (boyd & Crawford, 2012). To address these issues, scholars advocate mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative frame analysis with quantitative data mining, allowing for both depth and scale in research (Nisbet, 2010).

Case studies of specific events such as elections or public health crises also offer valuable insights into digital framing. For example, Kreiss et al. (2015) used a mixed-methods approach to study framing during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, combining manual coding of campaign messages with network analysis of Twitter interactions. Such studies have highlighted the importance of triangulating methods to capture the multifaceted nature of digital framing. Future methodological innovations should focus on integrating emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence for real-time frame detection while maintaining rigorous ethical standards.

## Critical Evaluation

The reviewed literature demonstrates significant advancements in framing theory, particularly in its adaptation to the participatory and algorithmic nature of digital media. The shift from elite-driven to user-driven framing, as seen on social media, has democratized narrative construction, empowered marginalized voices, and fostered collective action (Freelon et al., 2016). Simultaneously, algorithmic framing has introduced new challenges, raising questions about bias, transparency, and erosion of shared discourse (Diakopoulos, 2019). The intersection of framing with misinformation further complicates the field as digital platforms amplify false narratives through viral and emotionally charged frames (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Despite these contributions, several gaps remain in the literature. First, the long-term behavioral impact of digital framing remains underexplored. While studies often measure immediate attitudinal changes, few examine how sustained exposure to certain frames influences actions over time (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Second, the ethical implications of algorithmic framing, particularly its potential for manipulation, warrant greater attention (Ward, 2018). Third, the predominance of Western-centric research limits the generalizability of the findings, as cultural and linguistic diversity shapes framing in ways that are not yet fully understood (Yang, 2016). Finally, the rapid evolution of digital platforms, such as the rise of TikTok and virtual reality, outpaces research, leaving the emerging framing dynamics understudied.

## Discussion

The exploration of framing theory in the digital media age, as synthesized from approximately 60 studies spanning the last two decades, reveals a profound transformation in how information is constructed, disseminated, and interpreted in contemporary society. This discussion integrates the key themes—foundational evolution, social media dynamics, algorithmic influences, misinformation challenges, cross-cultural variations, and methodological innovations—to provide a holistic understanding of framing theory's current state and its implications for communication research. Framing theory has evolved from a model centered on traditional media gatekeepers to one that accounts for the participatory and decentralized nature of digital environments (Entman, 1993; Borah, 2011). The shift from elite-driven to user-driven framing, particularly on social media platforms, has democratized narrative construction, empowering individuals and marginalized groups to shape public discourse on critical issues, such as social justice and environmental crises (Harlow & Harp, 2012; Freelon et al., 2016). However, this empowerment comes with the risk of polarization, as echo chambers and selective exposure reinforce pre-existing beliefs, often deepening societal divides (Sunstein, 2017). The Black Lives Matter movement exemplifies this duality, where social media framing amplified counter-narratives against systemic racism, but also encountered resistance within ideologically homogeneous online communities (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016).

The role of algorithms in digital framing introduces another layer of complexity, as platforms such as Facebook and YouTube curate content through opaque mechanisms that prioritize engagement over diversity (Bucher, 2018; Pariser, 2011). Algorithmic framing, as seen in the 2016 U.S. election with the Cambridge Analytica scandal, can manipulate public opinion by tailoring frames to psychological profiles, raising ethical questions about user autonomy and the integrity of democratic processes (Isaak & Hanna, 2018; Diakopoulos, 2019). This underscores a critical tension: while digital

media expands access to information, it simultaneously fragments shared reality through personalized content streams, challenging the notion of a unified public sphere (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Compounding these challenges is the intersection of framing with misinformation, which is a pervasive issue in the digital age. Misinformation often gains traction through emotionally charged or culturally resonant frames, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic and political events such as Brexit, where false narratives shaped public behavior and eroded trust in institutions (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2020; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The emergence of deepfakes and manipulated media further blurs the line between truth and deception, necessitating new theoretical and practical approaches to counterdeceptive framing (Paris & Donovan, 2019). This issue highlights the urgency of integrating psychological insights into framing research to understand belief persistence and to design effective interventions (Ecker et al., 2022). Cross-cultural perspectives reveal that digital framing is not a universal phenomenon, but is deeply influenced by cultural, political, and linguistic contexts (Lee & Oh, 2013). While global events such as the Arab Spring demonstrate the transnational potential of digital framing, local interpretations vary significantly, as seen in the contrasting narratives of Hong Kong protests on Western versus Chinese platforms (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Lee & Chan, 2020). The predominance of Western-centric research limits the generalizability of findings, underscoring the need for studies that capture framing dynamics on non-Western platforms, such as WeChat or VKontakte (Yang, 2016). This gap points to a broader challenge in framing theory: achieving a truly global understanding of how digital media shapes perceptions across diverse societies.

Methodologically, the digital age demands innovation in order to keep pace with the volume and ephemerality of online content. Computational tools such as NLP and network analysis offer scalability, yet they often lack the nuance to capture contextual meaning, necessitating mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative depth with quantitative breadth (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Nisbet, 2010). The ethical implications of big data research, such as privacy concerns and further complications in the study of digital framing, require scholars to balance technological advancement with responsible practices (boyd & Crawford, 2012). Synthesizing these themes, it is evident that framing theory remains a vital lens for understanding communication in the digital era; however, it faces significant challenges in adapting to rapid technological and societal changes. The lack of longitudinal studies on behavioral impacts limits our understanding of how sustained exposure to digital frames influences actions over time, a gap that must be addressed to move beyond attitudinal effects (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Similarly, the ethical dimensions of algorithmic framing, particularly the potential for manipulation, warrant greater scrutiny, as does the exploration of emerging platforms such as TikTok, where visual and immersive framing introduce novel dynamics (Ward, 2018; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Ultimately, the future of framing theory lies in interdisciplinary collaboration, integrating insights from psychology, sociology, and computer science to tackle these multifaceted issues while embracing a global perspective that accounts for cultural diversity (Gillespie, 2018; Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019).

## Conclusion

Framing theory continues to be an essential framework for understanding communication in the digital media age. Over the past two decades, research has documented its evolution from focusing on traditional media gatekeepers to exploring the complex dynamics of participatory, algorithmic, and global framing. Social media has empowered users to co-construct narratives, whereas algorithms have introduced new forms of influence and bias. The challenges of misinformation and cultural diversity underscore the complexity of digital framing, necessitating innovative theoretical and methodological approaches. Addressing current gaps and embracing interdisciplinary perspectives will allow framing theory to continue illuminating the intricate interplay between media, technology, and society in an ever-evolving digital landscape. Framing theory has evolved significantly, from traditional media gatekeepers to the participatory dynamics of social media, where users co-create narratives. This shift has democratized discourse, empowering marginalized

voices and fostering collective action. However, it has also led to polarization, with echo chambers reinforcing pre-existing beliefs, deepening societal divides. The role of algorithms adds another layer of complexity, as platforms curate content to prioritize engagement, often at the expense of diversity. Algorithmic framing can manipulate public opinion, raising ethical questions about user autonomy and the integrity of democratic processes. This tension highlights the dual nature of digital media: expanding access to information while fragmenting shared reality through personalized content streams.

Moreover, the intersection of framing with misinformation presents a pervasive challenge in the digital age. False narratives gain traction through emotionally charged frames, shaping public behavior and eroding trust in institutions. The emergence of deepfakes further blurs the line between truth and deception, necessitating new approaches to counter deceptive framing. Cross-cultural perspectives reveal that digital framing is influenced by cultural, political, and linguistic contexts. The predominance of Western-centric research limits the generalizability of findings, underscoring the need for studies capturing framing dynamics on non-Western platforms. Methodologically, the digital age demands innovation to keep pace with online content's volume and ephemerality. Computational tools offer scalability but often lack nuance, necessitating mixed methods approaches combining qualitative depth with quantitative breadth. Ethical implications of big data research require balancing technological advancement with responsible practices. Ultimately, framing theory remains a vital lens for understanding communication in the digital era. However, it faces significant challenges in adapting to rapid technological and societal changes. By addressing gaps in longitudinal studies, algorithmic manipulation, and cultural diversity, and integrating interdisciplinary collaboration, framing theory can continue to provide valuable insights into the digital media landscape.

## Recommendations for Future Directions

To address these gaps, future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to assess the sustained impact of digital framing on behavior, moving beyond short-term attitudinal effects (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Interdisciplinary approaches, integrating insights from psychology, sociology, and computer science, could deepen the understanding of algorithmic framing and misinformation, particularly through the development of ethical AI tools for frame detection (Gillespie, 2018). Cross-cultural and multilingual studies are also essential to capture the global diversity of framing practices, ensuring that research reflects non-Western perspectives (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019). Such studies could illuminate the nuances of framing practices across different cultures and languages, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how digital framing operates in various contexts. Moreover, scholars should explore framing in emerging platforms and technologies such as TikTok's short-form video content and virtual reality environments, where visual and immersive elements introduce novel framing mechanisms (Bailenson, 2018). These platforms represent the next frontier in digital media, and understanding their framing dynamics is crucial for future communication strategies.

Finally, it is crucial to incorporate ethical considerations into the research on digital framing. As the use of big data and AI in framing analysis grows, addressing privacy concerns and ensuring the responsible use of technology will become paramount (boyd & Crawford, 2012). By balancing technological advancement with ethical practices, researchers can contribute to a more trustworthy and transparent digital media landscape.

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