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Wartime Influencers: Palestinian citizen journalism on
Instagram during the war on Gaza 2023-2024

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Abstract

This research explores how Palestinian social media influencers form the discourse of their narrative on the Israel-Gaza war 2023-2024. Specifically, the research will examine how these influencers utilize their online platforms to disseminate information, amplify voices, and mobilize support among their followers. It will explore the details of their content creation process, examining the types of narratives they promote, as well as the language and imagery they use. This research employs a case study analysis of Palestinian influencers during the Israel-Gaza war of 2023-2024, through a qualitative discourse analysis of social media content. This analysis will provide the communicational strategy used by Palestinian influencers. Through careful selection, three journalistic Palestinian Instagram influencers were chosen for this study, providing insights into the multifaceted ways in which these influencers engage with and frame the war narrative on Instagram. By examining the discursive practices utilized by these influencers, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of influencers and citizen journalism during wartime. In doing so, the study aims to address gaps in existing literature within the fields of media and communication and conflict studies.

Keywords: Palestinian influencers, citizen journalism, discourse analysis, framing (war) narrative, Israel/Gaza



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Introduction

When I think about the Israel-Gaza war of 2023-2024, I think about the role of social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. These platforms have allowed people to witness the atrocities committed on both sides since 7 October 2023. For example, on 26 May 2024, Rafah, a southern area in Gaza that housed a refugee camp sheltering displaced civilians in Tal al-Sultan, was targeted by Israeli air strikes. This tragic event resulted in the loss of at least 46 lives, including 23 women, children, and older people. The strikes in Rafah were followed by another reckless attack in al-Mawasi killing 21 more Palestinians; both sites are known to shelter displaced individuals, including vulnerable groups such as women, children, and persons with disabilities.¹ In light of these events, an AI generated image urging people to pay

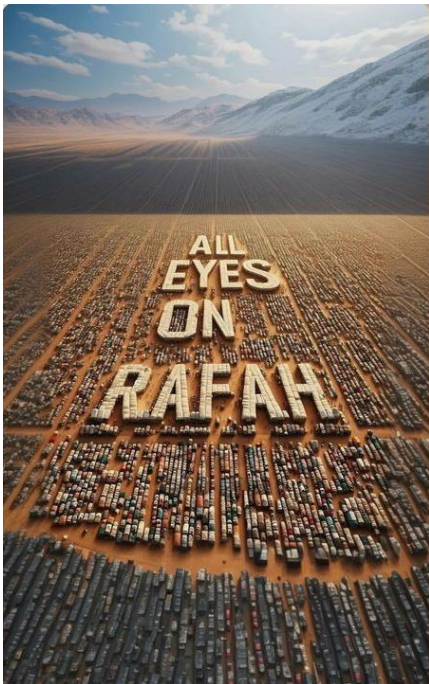


Image 1

attention to Israel's ongoing war in Gaza has been shared over 44 million times on Instagram, marking a significant social media campaign by supporters of Palestinians after the deadly Israeli airstrike (see image 1). The image shows tents in a camp arranged in a way to spell out "All Eyes on Rafah," and gained widespread attention through Instagram Stories, shared by influencers, athletes, and celebrities like "Bridgerton" star Nicola Coughlan and singer-songwriter Kehlani. Despite Meta's efforts to limit political content with video content being highly moderated; removed or restricted, Instagram has become a crucial platform for Palestinian journalistic influencers and supporters to post on the graphic aftermath of the strikes and other events during the Israel-Gaza war.²

I observed Instagram becoming a platform where Palestinian voices shared their perspectives on the Israel-Gaza war. Some influencers quickly gained millions of followers by telling their stories through images, videos, stories, and live broadcasts. It is this phenomenon and the understanding thereof that are the focus of this research. With this study I aim to uncover

¹ "UN Experts Outraged by Israeli Strikes on Civilians Sheltering in Rafah Camps," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), press release, May 29, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/05/un-experts-outraged-israeli-strikes-civilians-sheltering-rafah-camps>.

² Kat Tenbargo, "'All Eyes on Rafah' Image Shared by Millions on Instagram Following Israeli Airstrike," NBC News, May 29, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/-eyes-rafah-image-shared-millions-instagram-rcna154380>.



the discursive practices of Palestinian influencers by treating this phenomenon as a case study and analyzing their Instagram content through Fairclough's theory of discourse analysis and Jabri's critical perspective on discourse analysis.

Recent studies have explored the landscape of Palestinian digital activism and evidence from these studies shows that Palestinians online have specific goals as well as hardships they go through.

Mahmood Monshipouri and Theodore Prompichai argue that Palestinians aim to raise global awareness about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, documenting daily life and events under occupation, mobilizing people for protests and campaigns, countering narratives they believe misrepresent their situation, and building solidarity with like-minded individuals and organizations worldwide. This is to advance their activism and express political views, amplify their voices, share experiences, and garner support for their cause on an international scale.³

In doing so the Palestinians face various constraints online, which was particularly evident during the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah movement and the broader Palestinian cause. Sophia M. Kelsch underscores digital human rights violations, such as content deletion and account restrictions, documented by 7amleh (and others like Human Rights Watches).⁴ This highlights the suppression of Palestinian voices on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and X (former Twitter).⁵ Ivana Bevilacqua further elaborates on how this is attributing to algorithmic biases and technical errors.⁶ In a different but related context, Miryam Aouragh introduces the concept of cyber-colonialism, which describes the control and suppression of Palestinian online activities by Israeli military forces. This concept underscores how digital platforms can be used to shape the discourse surrounding the Palestinian cause, further complicating the struggle for visibility and narrative control in the digital realm.⁷

³Mahmood Monshipouri and Theodore Prompichai, "Digital Activism in Perspective: Palestinian Resistance via Social Media," *International Studies Journal (ISJ)* 14, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 37-57, https://www.isjq.ir/article_89793_f08536e9f60139dce0f0a806da024d07.pdf.

⁴7amleh - The Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, "The Attacks on Palestinian Digital Rights," *Digital Rights Incident Report*, May 6-19, 2021, accessed April 22, <https://7amleh.org/2021/05/21/7amleh-issues-report-documenting-the-attacks-on-palestinian-digital-rights>; Human Rights Watch, "Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook," 2023, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/palestine0323_web.pdf.

⁵Sophia Kelsch, "Digital Resistance: #SaveSheikhJarrah and the Role of Palestinian Activism on Social Media," October 2022, 28-32, file:///D:/documenten/master/blok%203%20internship/thesis%20sources/master_sophia_maria_kelsch.pdf.

⁶Ivana Bevilacqua, "E-scaping Apartheid: Digital Ventures of Zionist Settler Colonialism," *Human Geography* 15, no. 2 (2022): 224, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epdf/10.1177/19427786211055780>.

⁷Miriam Aouragh, "Resisting Cybercide, Strengthening Solidarity: Standing up to Israel's Digital Occupation," in *For Palestine: Essays from the Tom Hurndall Memorial Lecture Group*, ed. [Editor's Name], (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), 213-215, <https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0345.14.pdf>.



The goals of Palestinian online activism and the obstacles they face have become increasingly evident in recent years. However, there is still a lack of research on how they use online platforms to share and shape their narratives. This raises important questions about the discursive practices employed by Palestinian influencers and the specific role they play in this process.

To achieve their goal, Palestinian influencers must use certain discourse and framing strategies (discursive practices). The study of these strategies during wartime is crucial, particularly because Palestinian influencers face unique challenges and hindrances (which will be detailed in the first chapter, "Palestinians Online") that underscore the significance of their case. This research focuses on how these influencers shape the war narrative on the platform Instagram, an area that merges the fields of communication, media, and conflict studies. This rationale led me to explore the following topic: influencers' discursive practices during wartime.

Generally, this research looks into social media discursive practices used by influencers during wartime. This is an existing gap which becomes known when the two domains communication and media, and conflict studies come together. This will be highlighted further in the second chapter "Theories on Influencers and Citizen Journalism". This leads us to the research question: **How do Palestinian social media influencers shape the war narrative on Instagram during the Israeli war on Gaza 2023-2024?** In order to answer the research question this study will do so by addressing the following sub-questions:

Which spaces are available for Palestinians on social media platforms?

How do Palestinian influencers engage with Israeli (authorities') content?

Which strategies do Palestinian influencers use to circumvent censorship?

The first sub-question is to understand which spaces are available for Palestinians on social media platforms and what that means for them. More specifically, it will highlight the struggles Palestinians face online. Answering this question will be done in the first chapter "Palestinians Online", which serves as a background to this thesis, by drawing upon literature that delves into the various digital environments and opportunities for expression available to Palestinians as well as the internet infrastructure available to Palestinians. **The second** sub-question is to research how Palestinian influencers engage with Israeli (authorities') content. This examination aims to uncover how Palestinians handle content such as Israeli social media content disseminated by social media users. By analyzing this, I seek to reveal the strategies



influencers use to respond, counteract, or adapt to the content from Israeli sources, thereby understanding the dynamics of their online discourse. Lastly, **the third** sub-question will shed light on which strategies Palestinian influencers use to circumvent censorship. This inquiry focuses on the tactics and methods employed by influencers to bypass the digital constraints imposed by Meta on the Instagram platform. By researching these methods, I will highlight the innovative strategy of Palestinian influencers in maintaining their narrative presence despite significant moderation and censorship challenges. The next section will outline the methodology used to answer these questions.

Method

This research adopts a case study analysis of Palestinian influencers in wartime through a qualitative discourse analysis of social media content on Instagram during the Israel-Gaza war starting from 7 October 2023. Instagram is pivotal due to its role in social media activism, enabling rapid information dissemination, visual storytelling, and real-time engagement. Data will be collected from Instagram posts of selected Palestinian influencers. These influencers are chosen based on their ability to meet the standards of both an influencer and a citizen journalist, as will be discussed in the chapter “Theories on Influencers and Citizen Journalism”. Influencers like Motaz Azaiza and Plestia Alaqaad will be included, ensuring diversity in gender, age, and geographic location (inhabitants vs. diaspora).

Scope and Limitations

This research focuses exclusively on Instagram as the platform for examining Palestinian influencers' discursive practices during the Israel-Gaza war. The choice to limit the scope to Instagram is due to its significant role in contemporary social media activism, particularly among Palestinian influencers.

The time frame for this study is specifically the period from 7 October 2023, onwards, in line with the Palestinian influencers' online behavior covering events and the growth of their audience. This concentrated time frame allows for a detailed analysis of every post made by the influencers, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their narratives.

Potential biases are a significant consideration for this research. The study's focus on pro-Palestinian content means it captures a particular perspective, which is not the only side of the story. There is a risk of encountering misinformation alongside factual content. Additionally, biases inherent in Meta's algorithms may affect the visibility and spread of certain



content, influencing the outcomes of this research. The limited scope of examining three influencers also impacts the generalizability of the findings; it means the results do not represent the broader spectrum of Palestinian influencers' online behavior in its entirety.

Positionality and Ethics

As a researcher with a background in Middle Eastern studies, having studied Islam and Arabic, and as a Muslim woman, I acknowledge that my personal and academic background influence my perspective on the Israel-Gaza war. My sympathy for the Palestinian cause informs my research interest; however, I am highly aware of this and strive to maintain the right balance of objectivity and academic rigor in my analysis and throughout the entirety of this research. Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge emphasizes that all knowledge is partial and situated, rejecting the notion of an objective, all-seeing perspective.⁸ She argues that acknowledging one's position and perspective does not undermine scientific rigor but rather enriches it by bringing in diverse, contextual insights.⁹ To achieve the right balance in my research, I continuously reflect on my thoughts and potential biases. I ensure a transparent methodology by documenting and justifying my research methods, data collection, and analysis procedures, enhancing the work's credibility. Additionally, recognizing the value of some subjectivity, I aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the Palestinian influencers discourse while ensuring that this research contributes meaningfully to academic discourse and broader public awareness of the Palestinian narrative.

Another factor that led me to write my thesis on this topic is witnessing how Palestinian people are treated online by Meta during my internship at 7amleh – The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media – a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting digital rights and advocating for Palestinian narratives online. A new side of the phenomenon was revealed. My internship at 7amleh gave me the opportunity to have a look into what (pro-)Palestinian content moderation, when done wrong, can look like. 7amleh's mission mainly focuses on protecting human rights in the digital spaces while fighting digital discrimination and ensuring safe and open internet access for Palestinians. They achieve this through research, advocacy, and capacity building. Research is a key part of 7amleh's work and takes the form of documenting digital rights violations, monitoring social media trends, and analyzing data to produce reports on issues like censorship, digital attacks, and online hate speech. My internship

⁸ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 581-584, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

⁹ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 585-586.



at 7amleh was in light of helping the research project that will result in yet another report that helps them with realizing their mission. My fellow students and I analyzed over 2,5 thousand cases in which users felt they had been moderated wrongly (and as proven before, was indeed often the case).

Lastly, representing the voices of journalistic Palestinian influencers accurately and respectfully is crucial. To this end, I will select influencers with significant reach and recognition, ensuring their impact and relevance are adequately captured and justified through references in news articles and other credible sources.

Overview

Following the introduction, **Chapter 1: “Palestinians Online”** frames the context of the Israel-Gaza war and maps the online sphere available to Palestinians, their online behavior, and struggles. This chapter forms the background to this thesis. **Chapter 2: “Theories on Influencers and Citizen Journalism”** introduces the theoretical and conceptual framework guiding the study, identifies gaps in the literature, discusses how this research contributes to bridging this existing gap, and covers key concepts such as influencers and citizen journalism. **Chapter 3: “Research Blueprint: Methodology”** details the research design, focusing on the qualitative discourse analysis method used for this study. It explains the selection process for Palestinian influencers on Instagram and outlines the data collection process, concluding with profiles of the chosen Palestinian influencers. **Chapter 4: “Palestinian Influencers Content (Analysis)”** examines the data using the analytical framework informed by the earlier discussed chapter 3. This analysis provides insights into the discursive practices used by the influencers to shape public perception and mobilize support which is then linked to the used theories. Finally, **Chapter 5: “End of the Feed: Conclusions”** summarizes the key findings and their significance, reflects on the overall research process, acknowledges the limitations, and suggests areas for future research.



1. Palestinians Online

1.1 Online Sphere

This section provides an essential background to the Israel-Gaza war, framing the analysis of Palestinian online behaviors and discourses that follow. The overview aims to contextualize the environment in which Palestinian influencers operate and shape their narratives online. Additionally to the context, the online infrastructure, use of social media by Palestinians, and their online behavior are highlighted, guided by the question: What does 'online' look like for Palestinians?

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is a highly complex and multifaceted issue that has spanned over several decades, involving multiple wars, uprisings, and failed peace attempts. Understanding the full scope of this conflict requires a deep dive into its historical roots, including the 1947 UN partition plan that proposed separate Jewish and Arab states, the subsequent declaration of the state of Israel in 1948, and the mass displacement of Palestinians, known as the Nakba. Over the years, the region has witnessed numerous wars, such as the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, alongside continuous cycles of violence and peace efforts, including the Oslo Accords and the Camp David Summit. However, the intricate dynamics of the conflict, involving issues like the status of Jerusalem, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and the ongoing Israeli settlement activities, are too vast to be covered comprehensively in this thesis.

The current war, which began on 7 October 2023, when Hamas militants launched a large-scale attack on southern Israel, has been particularly devastating. This attack resulted in the deaths of 1,200 people and the capture of 253 hostages. Israel's subsequent military response has led to the deaths of over 33,000 Palestinians, marking this conflict as one of the most violent chapters in the ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁰

The current war has escalated into a severe humanitarian crisis, marked by the halting of essential aid through critical crossings like Rafah. This blockade has led to dire shortages of food, water, and medical supplies, severely impacting the lives of civilians. Over 1.8 million people have been displaced due to Israeli military evacuation orders, creating overcrowded conditions in shelters and increasing the risk of disease outbreaks from inadequate sanitation and water facilities. The humanitarian catastrophe is compounded by Israel's intensified military actions, including extensive airstrikes and ground incursions aimed at targeting Hamas'

¹⁰ Reuters. "What is the history of the Israel-Palestinian conflict?" April 4, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/whats-israel-palestinian-conflict-about-how-did-it-start-2024-01-14/>



infrastructure. These operations have caused widespread destruction and a significant number of civilian casualties. The international community has responded with global protests and diplomatic efforts to establish ceasefires, though maintaining these ceasefires has proven challenging amid the persistent violence. This conflict not only worsens the humanitarian situation but also underscores the deep-rooted and complex issues that continue to fuel instability in the region.¹¹

The ongoing war profoundly shapes the content of Palestinian influencers. However, other aspects, such as the online infrastructure, restrictions, and control mechanisms, play a crucial role in shaping how these narratives are constructed and disseminated. In the context of Palestine/Israel, the online infrastructure accessible to Palestinians is profoundly shaped by a triad of controlling forces: Israeli military control, restrictive policies enacted by the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the involvement of Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The Israeli occupation exerts significant influence over the region's internet infrastructure, limiting high-speed access primarily to densely populated urban areas and maintaining the capability to entirely cut off internet access during military operations. This infrastructural control is further compounded by extensive Israeli censorship practices, including algorithmic surveillance of Palestinian social media. This surveillance targets content critical of Israeli policies, often focusing on specific Arabic words such as 'martyr,' 'Al-Aqsa,' and 'jihad,' leading to the detention of numerous Palestinians. The use of predictive policing technologies to preemptively identify potential dissent is a particularly invasive aspect of this control. As Cristiano notes, "Palestinians' freedom of speech appears not to be violated through access denial [...] Rather, having access to internet at these conditions creates an additional layer of separation between Palestinians and their denied liberties."¹²

Additionally, the PA enforces its own restrictive measures, including the cybercrime law, which criminalizes various forms of online expression perceived as detrimental to 'national unity' or 'social harmony.' This legislation not only stifles dissent but also mandates that ISPs and tech companies remove content deemed inappropriate, further narrowing the scope of online freedoms. The combined controls exerted by Israeli authorities, the PA, and ISPs create a challenging digital environment where Palestinian voices are increasingly marginalized. This

¹¹ Mariano Zafra and Jon McClure, "Mapping the Conflict in Israel and Gaza," *Reuters*, May 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-PALESTINIANS/MAPS/movajdladpa/>.

¹² Fabio Cristiano, "Internet Access as Human Right: A Dystopian Critique from the Occupied Palestinian Territory," in *Human Rights as Battlefields*, ed. G. Blouin-Genest, M.C. Doran, and S. Paquerot (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 258, <file:///D:/documenten/master/blok%203%20internship/thesis%20sources/fabio%20internet%20acces%20as%20human%20rights.pdf>.



multifaceted governance structure not only restricts digital rights but also works towards erasing Palestinian digital spaces, reflecting broader strategies of control and surveillance that suppress Palestinian narratives both online and offline. The complex dynamic raises critical questions about the attainability of digital rights under such a tightly controlled and surveilled system.¹³

The influence of Israel in the online spheres for Palestinians is significant and extends to the point of being characterized as cyber-colonialism, a concept detailed by Miryam Aouragh. This term describes the strategic use of the Internet and digital technologies by the Israeli state to control and suppress Palestinian online activities. Aouragh highlights how the Israeli military incorporates the Internet into its strategies, not merely as a medium of communication but as a critical battleground for achieving political and military objectives. This cyber-colonialism reflects the broader concept of settler colonialism, with Israel's actions in cyberspace mirroring its physical control over Palestinian territories. The Israeli military's tactics include jamming and hacking communication signals, destroying infrastructure like fiber-optic cables, and engaging in cyber warfare during conflicts, such as the 2006 Lebanon war and the Gaza invasions. These actions are aimed at limiting Palestinian voices, disrupting grassroots mobilization, and controlling the narrative both online and offline. Cyber-colonialism operates through a dual mechanism of overt suppression and covert surveillance, continuously monitoring and intimidating Palestinian activists and everyday users. This digital suppression extends the physical occupation, reflecting a comprehensive approach to controlling and destabilizing Palestinian society.¹⁴

1.2 Online Treatment

Proceeding to how Palestinians are treated online, it is apparent that Palestinians face significant restrictions and unfair treatment, as documented by both 7amleh and Human Rights Watch. The 7amleh report highlights the widespread issue of online hate speech and incitement to violence against Palestinians, which predominantly occurs on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Telegram. This hate speech has a direct correlation with real-world harm, as seen in past incidents like the attack on the village of Huwara.¹⁵ On October 6, 2023, a violent assault was reportedly carried out by Israeli settlers in the village of Huwara, located in the West Bank. The incident followed an escalation in online hate speech and incitement, particularly on

¹³ Cristiano, "Internet Access as Human Right," 256-260

¹⁴ Aouragh, "Resisting Cybercide," 213-215.

¹⁵ 7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, "Briefing on The Palestinian Digital Rights Situation since October 7th, 2023," June 2023, 2, <https://7amleh.org/storage/Briefing%20October%207th%20-6E.pdf>.



platforms like Twitter, where users justified the violence. The attack led to significant damage and injuries among the local Palestinian population, underscoring the dangerous real-world consequences of unchecked online incitement.¹⁶

Furthermore, 7amleh has documented instances of disinformation and misinformation being weaponized to propagate hatred and incite violence against Palestinians, significantly impacting their freedom of expression and access to information. More so, there is significant and disproportionate censorship of Palestinian voices, which severely restricts freedom of expression and access to information, especially for journalists and human rights defenders.¹⁷

The Human Rights Watch report similarly underscores systemic censorship by Meta's platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, which have been sites for widespread violations of Palestinian digital rights. This includes the removal of (prominent) Palestinian accounts and the censorship of content critical of Israel, which often has gotten labeled as hate speech or dangerous.¹⁸ Meta's inconsistent and opaque policies around content moderation have led to the disproportionate targeting of Palestinian content, while harmful content inciting violence against Palestinians often remains online.¹⁹ Human Rights Watch also notes the lack of transparency around government requests for content removal and the heavy reliance on automation, which exacerbates these issues even further.²⁰ These systemic practices by digital platforms, influenced by political pressures, contribute to the dehumanization of Palestinians and the suppression of their narratives.²¹

Additionally, Ivana Bevilacqua too, raises concerns about the unfair removal of Palestinian content from social media platforms. She points to glitches, technical errors, and biases in algorithms as causes of the problem. Her text highlights that Palestinian users might not get equal online protection, even when dealing with hate speech. It criticizes the use of automated content moderation, which, influenced by human biases, tends to unfairly censor Palestinian voices.²²

This bias is further strengthened and imbedded in the idea that Meta is a profit-oriented and capitalistic enterprise, focusing on maximizing financial returns and adhering to the

¹⁶ Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal, "The Real-World Impact of Online Incitement on Palestinians and Other Vulnerable Communities," *TechPolicy.Press*, September 12, 2023, <https://www.techpolicy.press/the-real-world-impact-of-online-incitement-on-palestinians-and-other-vulnerable-communities/>.

¹⁷ 7amleh, "Briefing on The Palestinian 100 Digital Rights Situation," 2, 3.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook," (December 2023): 27.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Meta's Broken Promises," 33-36.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Meta's Broken Promises," 36-40.

²¹ Human Rights Watch, "Meta's Broken Promises," 29.

²² Bevilacqua, "E-scaping Apartheid," 221, 224.



principles of capitalism. Media enterprises, including Meta, operate within the logic of capitalism, prioritizing profit-making and market expansion. This capitalist nature drives their operations and strategic decisions, ensuring that profitability remains at the core of their business model. As an implication, the content/information goes where the money flows.²³

1.3 Palestinian Online Aims

Mahmood Monshipouri and Theodore Prompichai try to analyze the use of social media platforms, such as X (former: Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok, by Palestinians in general. These platforms would have different purposes, with Twitter (now X) for real-time updates and hashtag campaigns, Facebook for sharing longer content, YouTube for citizen journalism through videos, Instagram for visual storytelling, WhatsApp for closed group communication, and TikTok for creative expression. The authors suggest that Palestinians endeavor to raise international awareness about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This involves documenting their everyday lives and occurrences under occupation, mobilizing people for protests and campaigns, challenging what they see as misrepresentations of their situation, and building alliances with individuals and organizations worldwide who share their perspectives. In essence it is to advance their activism, express their political views, amplify their voices, share experiences, and garner support for their cause on an international scale.²⁴

In her dissertation: 'Digital Resistance: #SaveSheikhJarrah and the role of Palestinian Activism on Social Media' Sophia Maria Kelsch focuses on transnational social movements and digital mobilization through a case study of the uprisings in Sheikh Jarrah. This dissertation is centered around the viral hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah in May 2021, documenting its impact on global attention to Palestinian issues. Through the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah, Palestinians highlighted the distorted global media image of Palestine. The hashtag brought the Palestinian cause to a broader audience, providing faces, voices, and trusted accounts, challenging mainstream narratives. Furthermore, similar to the already discussed goals, Kelsch argues their aim was raising international awareness and educating on the cause, mobilizing people for solidarity, countering the Zionist narrative and the increasing normalization of the occupation, and creating a(n) (online) historical archive.²⁵

²³ Yantao Bi, "The Political Economy of the Flow of Information," *Asian Culture and History* 4, no. 2 (June 2012): 43-44, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v4n2p43>.

²⁴ Monshipouri and Prompichai, "Digital Activism in Perspective," 48-52.

²⁵ Kelsch, "Digital Resistance," 45, 47, 48-50.



In case of the Palestinians, it has become clear they face many difficulties in voicing their narrative of the Palestine-Israel war/conflict. In the following chapter, the conceptual framework will be elaborated by discussing theories on influencers and citizen journalism.



2. Theories on Influencers and Citizen Journalism

To begin, it's important to outline who shapes conflict discourses according to the literature. This helps to integrate perspectives from media studies on influencers with conflict studies on discourse. Furthermore, this chapter will explore the concepts of influencers and citizen journalism, aiding in the identification of Palestinian journalistic influencers later on.

Conflict discourses are shaped by a variety of actors, each contributing to the framing and understanding of conflicts through their unique perspectives and platforms. Traditionally, journalists play a crucial role in shaping conflict discourses by reporting events, providing commentary, and framing issues through media outlets.²⁶ Politicians influence conflict discourses by framing policies and events to align with their agendas, using speeches, press releases, and social media to shape public perception and garner support.²⁷ Activists and social movements use digital platforms to highlight issues, mobilize support, and challenge dominant narratives, playing a crucial role in bringing attention to underrepresented aspects of conflicts. Both mass media and social media are pivotal in creating and spreading conflict discourses, shaping narratives through selective reporting, framing, and editorial choices (YouTube, August 27, 2021).²⁸ Additionally, Scholars and academics contribute to conflict discourses through research, analysis, and theoretical frameworks, providing in-depth examinations of conflicts that often influence both public opinion and policymaking.

Influencers serve as significant discursive agents in the digital landscape, leveraging their platforms to shape public discourse and influence opinions. According to Leipold and Winkel, discursive agents are those who actively participate in the creation, dissemination, and transformation of discourse, utilizing their social positions and resources to impact the public sphere.²⁹ Influencers, through their strategic use of language, visuals, and narratives, construct and propagate specific frames and ideologies. This is particularly evident in political discourses, where influencers can challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative viewpoints, thus

²⁶ Serena Miller, "Citizen Journalism," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 5,

<https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-786>; Alfredo Rojas-Calderón, "Constructive Journalistic Roles in Environments of Social Complexity and Political Crisis," *Journalism and Media* 5, no. 2 (2024): 629, <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia5020042>.

²⁷ Christian Burgers, Elly A. Konijn, and Gerard J. Steen, "Figurative Framing: Shaping Public Discourse Through Metaphor, Hyperbole, and Irony," *Communication Theory* 26, no. 4 (2016): 410-411, 429-430.

²⁸ "Media and Conflict Discourse," YouTube video, 1:15:43, posted by Caucasus Edition, August 27, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cS3yXWafBEE>.

²⁹ Sina Leipold and Georg Winkel, "Discursive Agency: (Re-)Conceptualizing Actors and Practices in the Analysis of Discursive Policymaking," *Policy Studies Journal* 45, no. 3 (2016): 7, 8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12172>.



reshaping public perception and dialogue. By engaging with their followers/audiences through comments, likes, shares, and live stories influencers not only disseminate content but also foster interactive spaces where discourse is continuously negotiated and evolved.

The following section presents a literature review that synthesizes various scholarly perspectives from media and communication studies on the definition and role of influencers. It explores the definition and role of influencers, examining their impact on public discourse and social dynamics.

2.1 Being an Influencer

‘Influencers’ are individuals who leverage social media platforms to shape public opinion and behaviors through their content. They typically have a substantial following and are regarded as trusted sources within specific niches, such as fashion, technology, or politics. According to Abidin influencers use their personal brand and social media presence to engage with their audiences, creating content that resonates with their followers' interests and values.³⁰ Influencers are seen as key players in the digital marketing landscape due to their ability to foster strong relationships with their followers and drive consumer behavior.³¹ Their role extends beyond marketing; they also participate in shaping discourses by providing commentary, sharing news, and mobilizing support for various causes.³² Literature on influencers highlights their dual role as content creators and opinion leaders, emphasizing their impact on both consumer markets and public discourse.

In “The Commercialization of Social Media Stars: A Literature Review and Conceptual Framework on the Strategic Use of Social Media Influencers,” an analysis of 154 peer-reviewed academic publications from 2018 to 2020 is conducted. The review highlights that while the majority of studies primarily focuses on influencers as a commercial marketing tactic, some explore their potential in inciting behavioral change or shaping public opinion like journalistic accounts/content.³³ The review further tries to define influencers and does so by providing a

³⁰ Crystal Abidin and Mart Ots, "The Influencer's Dilemma: The Shaping of New Brand Professions Between Credibility and Commerce," August 2015, 4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378776689_The_Influencer's_dilemma_The_shaping_of_new_brand_professions_between_credibility_and_commerce.

³¹ S. Khamis, L. Ang, and R. Welling, "Self-branding, ‘micro-celebrity’ and the rise of Social Media Influencers," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 2 (2017): 193-196, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>.

³² Karen Freberg, Kristin Graham, Karen McGaughey, and Laura Freberg, "Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality," *Public Relations Review* 37, no. 1 (2011): 91-92, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001>.

³³ Liselot Hudders, Steffi De Jans, and Marijke De Veirman, "The Commercialization of Social Media Stars: A Literature Review and Conceptual Framework on the Strategic Use of Social Media Influencers," *International Journal of Advertising* 40, no. 3 (2021): 327–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1836925>.



comprehensive examination of the definition and conceptualization. It highlights the desired status of being an influencer, which has led to a proliferation of individuals seeking this role. They are characterized by two key aspects: reach and impact. Reach refers to the size and influence of an influencer's audience and is measured by the number of followers on social media platforms and the engagement of those followers (with likes, comments or their posts being shared). Influencers with a large and engaged audience have the potential to disseminate their messages widely. Impact, on the other hand, refers to the influencer's ability to influence/sway the decisions of others, which can be achieved through various manners with factors, including expertise, authenticity, and a close connection with their followers.³⁴

The review not only explores the characteristics of influencers, such as their reach and impact but also delves into how these attributes manifest across different categories of influencers. Social media influencers can be categorized based on the size of their audience. Celebrity influencers, who have established fame outside social media through traditional media channels such as television or movies, have a large and engaged audience that they leverage to promote products and services. Mega-influencers, with over 1 million followers, have an exceptionally large audience and are often seen as experts in their niche, commanding high fees for endorsements. Macro-influencers, with 100,000 to 1 million followers, have a large and engaged audience interested in their niche and are suitable for brands looking to reach a broader audience. Micro-influencers, with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, have a smaller but more engaged audience, making them more relatable and trustworthy compared to mega-influencers or macro-influencers. Lastly, nano-influencers, with less than 10,000 followers, have a very small yet highly engaged audience, making them ideal for brands targeting a specific niche audience.³⁵

These categorizations highlight the diverse ways influencers can be utilized, whether for marketing purposes, shaping public opinion, or acting as journalistic voices.

2.2 Citizen Journalism

Now turning our attention to 'citizen journalism', a concept that will help to elucidate the phenomenon, given its apparent alignment with the subject matter. Citizen journalism allows individuals to publish their stories and content independently of news-media organizations, challenging the truthfulness and representativeness of information.

³⁴ Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman, "The Commercialization of Social Media Stars," 333-335.

³⁵ Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman, "The Commercialization of Social Media Stars," 335-336.



In the article "Citizen Journalism" in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, Miller discusses the emergence of citizen journalism and its implications for the field of journalism. It further explores the role of citizen journalists in news production, the impact of technology on citizen journalism, and the evolving dynamics between traditional journalism and citizen reporting. The article addresses the redefinition of journalism and the changing perceptions of who can be considered a journalist in the context of citizen journalism.³⁶ The definition of who we can call a journalist has evolved to include individuals who are not professionally trained or employed by traditional news organizations but engage in the gathering, preparation, and dissemination of news and information. Citizen journalists are typically ordinary people who use digital technologies and social media platforms to report on events, share opinions, and contribute to public discourse.³⁷ Given this description, influencers can also be considered citizen journalists when they utilize their platforms to report on events, share insights, and engage in public discourse. Citizen journalists are characterized by their approach to news reporting, often with a focus on hyperlocal issues, marginalized communities, or topics that may not receive extensive coverage in mainstream media. They play an important role in diversifying the sources of news and providing alternative perspectives on current events. While traditional journalists are associated with established news organizations and adhere to professional standards and ethical guidelines, citizen journalists operate independently and may not always follow traditional journalistic practices.³⁸ It is the distinction between the two that has led to debates about the credibility and reliability of citizen journalism compared to traditional journalism. Overall, in the realm of citizen journalism, the definition of a journalist expands to encompass individuals who actively participate in news creation and dissemination, regardless of formal training or affiliation with traditional media outlets.³⁹

Scholarly research has examined the quality and credibility of citizen-journalism content, finding that citizen journalists often meet traditional news-content quality standards.⁴⁰ However, theoretical boundaries and definitions of citizen journalism remain varied and unarticulated. Generally/Theoretically, these citizen journalists prioritize community, advocacy, and interpretation over objectivity and fact-based reporting, serving as effective

³⁶ Serena Miller, "Citizen Journalism," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 7, <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-786>.

³⁷ Miller, "Citizen Journalism," 5.

³⁸ Miller, "Citizen Journalism," 6.

³⁹ Miller, "Citizen Journalism," 7.

⁴⁰ Gillmor, D. (2006). *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 125-129.



checks on traditional journalists and challenging them to avoid being mere mouthpieces for governments.⁴¹ While its roots trace back to historical practices like political pamphleteering, the contemporary emergence of citizen journalism coincides with the rise of internet publishing technologies, particularly blogging and social media platforms.⁴² Theoretical definitions of citizen journalism have varied over time and scholars have attempted to define citizen journalists based on their roles in providing independent and relevant information, covering marginalized communities, and promoting civic engagement. Overall, citizen journalism bypasses traditional news gatekeepers by providing a wide range of topics, diverse voices and perspectives.⁴³

2.3 Influencers as (citizen) Journalists: strategies and tactics

These concepts form the foundation of the conceptual framework, guiding the analysis of Palestinian influencers and their profiles. It helps identify the appropriate influencers that aids to see influencers as (citizen) journalist who employ discursive practices for this research by providing criteria as follows:

1. **Influencer Characteristics:**

For influencers to be considered an influencer, they must possess substantial followings on social media platforms and actively engage with their audiences by creating and sharing content such as posts, videos, stories, and live streams. They are characterized by their distinct personal brands that resonate with their followers' interests and values, fostering a sense of community and personal connection. Influencers are perceived as authentic and trustworthy, often sharing personal experiences and emotive content to mobilize support and generate empathy.

2. **Role of Citizen Journalism:**

For these influencers to be considered citizen journalists, they must engage in activities typically associated with journalism, such as gathering, preparing, and disseminating news and information. This includes reporting on events, sharing opinions, and contributing to public discourse, often focusing on hyperlocal issues, marginalized communities, or topics underrepresented in mainstream media. Citizen journalists operate independently of traditional news organizations. They are noted for emphasizing community, advocacy, and personal

⁴¹ Miller, "Citizen Journalism," 1-3, 7.

⁴² Miller, "Citizen Journalism," 6.

⁴³ Miller, "Citizen Journalism," 8.



interpretation, rather than adhering strictly to objectivity and factual reporting, serving as effective checks on traditional journalism. The key attributes of citizen journalists include providing independent and relevant information, covering marginalized communities, and promoting civic engagement.

This concludes the theoretical framework for understanding the roles and characteristics of influencers as citizen journalists. In the next section, the focus is on the methodology, which outlines the research design and methods used to analyze the social media content of Palestinian influencers.



3. Research Blueprint: Methodology

As discourse analysis is central in this research, Fairclough's chapters will be consulted to guide the methodology. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach to studying language that emphasizes the interconnections between language, power, and society. Fairclough outlines that CDA involves analyzing both the micro-level details of language use and the macro-level structures of social practices and institutions.⁴⁴

In Norman Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, the concept of ideology plays a central role in understanding the power dynamics inherent in language use. Fairclough emphasizes that "language is a material form of ideology,"⁴⁵ meaning that all language is loaded with ideological significance, influencing how social realities are constructed and perceived. He argues that even seemingly neutral or factual language can be ideologically charged, as it reflects and reinforces existing power structures and societal norms. This understanding of language as an ideological tool underscores its capacity to shape public consciousness and maintain or challenge the status quo.⁴⁶

For this framework, emotive language emerges as a potent mechanism for engaging with and influencing public perception. Emotive language, which involves the use of emotionally charged words and expressions, is particularly effective in connecting with audiences on an emotional level. By evoking feelings such as empathy, anger, or solidarity, this type of language can mobilize support for specific ideologies or causes. Fairclough notes that the style and choice of language in texts are not merely stylistic choices but are significant in conveying ideological meanings.⁴⁷

Fairclough further argues that ideology is embedded in language at multiple levels, manifesting in both *structures* and *discursive* events. Structures refer to the broader, enduring frameworks and systems within society that shape and are shaped by discourse, such as social norms, institutions, and power relations. In the context of this thesis, these structures include the socio-political dynamics of the Israel-Gaza war, the censorship policies of social media platforms, and the prevailing media narratives. Discursive events are specific instances of language use which contribute to the construction and negotiation of meaning. It can be any communicative act, such as a speech, conversation, social media post, news article, or public debate, where discourse is produced and exchanged. These events both reflect and influence

⁴⁴ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 3-4, 31.

⁴⁵ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 59.

⁴⁶ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 56-60.

⁴⁷ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 61.



the larger structures they are part of. For example, when an influencer posts about an Israeli attack, they are not just reporting an event; they are engaging with and potentially challenging dominant narratives and power relations. By examining language as a material form of ideology, it is possible to analyze how these influencers construct their narratives and frame them within broader socio-political contexts.⁴⁸

Furthermore, another important concept in Norman Fairclough's framework is *hegemony*, which refers to the dominance of one social group over others, achieved not solely through coercion but also by securing the consent of the governed. This concept is particularly relevant as it highlights how power dynamics are maintained and challenged within discourse. This dominance is established by making certain ideologies and practices seem natural or common sense, thereby embedding them into everyday life. Fairclough emphasizes that hegemony operates across economic, political, cultural, and ideological domains. Language and communication are crucial tools in this process, as they enable dominant groups to shape beliefs and perceptions to align with their interests, often making their control seem legitimate and unchallenged. Thus, discourse becomes a battleground where various groups compete for influence and control of the narrative, with the potential to reinforce or disrupt existing power structures. Through this lens, I can see how Palestinian influencers use their platforms to resist and reshape dominant narratives, challenging the established hegemony.⁴⁹

Furthering this analysis, Fairclough delves into the methodological aspects of CDA, emphasizing the importance of *intertextuality* and *interdiscursivity* in understanding how texts relate to one another and to different discourses. *Intertextuality* refers to the way texts draw upon and transform other texts; it involves the way one text references, incorporates, or responds to another text. This concept highlights how texts are interconnected and how meanings are shaped by these connections. *Interdiscursivity* on the other hand involves the combination of different discourses and genres within a single text. These concepts will be applied to the Instagram content of Palestinian influencers, examining how their posts reference and build upon other media sources, cultural narratives, and historical contexts.⁵⁰

Lastly, worth mentioning here, is Vivienne Jabri's approach to discourse analysis of violent conflict in the chapter "Conflict Analysis Reconsidered" of her book *Discourses on Violence*. Jabri's introduction chapter emphasizes critical reflexivity, the relationship between

⁴⁸ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 37, 38.

⁴⁹ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 61-67.

⁵⁰ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman, 1995), 188-191.



structure and agency, and the construction of identity within discursive practices.⁵¹ Jabri uses structuration theory to analyze how conflicts are shaped by both the capacity of individuals to act independently (agency) by highlighting the role of human agency in shaping social structures (such as institutions, norms, and power relations).⁵² Jabri uses this to argue that individuals and groups are not merely passive subjects of structural forces but active agents who can influence and change these structures through their actions and discourses. With this she offers me a critical lens from a conflict study perspective with aspects that aligns with the objectives of my thesis. Her approach underscores the importance of examining how discourses—systems of meaning and representation—shape and are shaped by violent conflict.⁵³

Jabri also discusses the role of identity in violent conflict and how they are formed through discursive practices and become mobilized in support of violence, further legitimizing resistance against forces through the creation of narratives. She emphasizes that identities are not fixed but are constructed and reconstructed through discourse, involving historical and cultural narratives that provide a sense of continuity and belonging. In conflict settings, identities can be instrumentalized for political purposes to rally support and legitimize causes.⁵⁴

Fairclough's CDA and Jabri's approach share a focus on the relationship between language and power, analyzing how language maintains and challenges societal structures. Both emphasize ideology embedded in language, the dynamic between structure and agency, and the importance of discursive practices and critical reflexivity. Fairclough provides a broad framework for understanding power dynamics in discourse, while Jabri adds a specific focus on violent conflict, critically examining who constructs and disseminates narratives, and how these narratives shape and are shaped by conflict dynamics. Jabri's approach enriches the analysis by emphasizing identity construction and the mobilization of identities in support of resistance, providing a nuanced perspective on the role of social media influencers during the Israel-Gaza war.

3.1 Research Design

As stated above, this research focuses specifically on discourse analysis of social media content to examine the discursive practices employed by Palestinian influencers on Instagram

⁵¹ Vivienne Jabri, "Introduction," in *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1-24.

⁵² Jabri, "Introduction," 3, 4.

⁵³ Jabri, "Introduction," 9.

⁵⁴ Jabri, "Introduction," 7.



during the Israel-Gaza war from 7 October 2023, onwards with data collection focusing on the posts of selected users.

The choice of Instagram is due to its significant role in contemporary social media activism, particularly among (pro-)Palestinian influencers. Instagram has features, such as stories and live streaming, that enable its users to document and share their realities, offering a counter-narrative to mainstream media which comes with its cons like misinformation as well.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the platform's visual-centric approach helps users in humanizing the war, allowing followers to connect emotionally with the content, which is crucial for advocacy and activism.⁵⁶

3.2 Data Collection Method

The data collection will focus on Instagram posts from prominent Palestinian influencers during the war. Specific content will be searched to address the sub-questions, while a comprehensive review of all posts from 7 October 2023, onward will identify reoccurring patterns, themes, and frequently used discourses, as well as highlight notable content. Influencers will be considered for the study based on the criteria outlined in the chapter “2.3 Influencers as (Citizen) Journalists: Strategies and Tactics.”

Furthermore, to ensure a representative sample of Palestinian influencers, additional factors such as gender, age, and geographic location (inhabitants of Palestine versus the diaspora) are taken into consideration to capture a diverse range of perspectives and experiences.

3.3 Data Analysis

As mentioned before, the research is rooted in discourse analysis, as guided by Fairclough strengthened by Jabri to ensure an in-depth analysis. Drawing on the insights from the methodological chapter, an analytical framework has been developed, utilizing 'labels' to categorize content based on their characteristics.

Analytical Framework:

1. **Language and Ideology (F):** This examines how the language employed by Palestinian influencers reflects their political beliefs and challenges existing power structures. For example, the use of terms like "occupation" and "genocide" to describe Israeli actions.

⁵⁵ Kelsch, "Digital Resistance," 22-24.

⁵⁶ Kelsch, "Digital Resistance," 27



2. **Emotive Language (F)** This label focuses on the strategic use of emotionally charged words to connect deeply with the audience, fostering empathy and solidarity, conveying the severity of the situation and evoking a powerful emotional response.
3. **Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity (F):** This process involves analyzing how posts reference and integrate various texts and discourses to construct a narrative. For example, the use of historical photographs alongside current images to draw parallels between past events and the present conflict in Gaza. Interdiscursivity is key to understanding the merging of different discourses within a single text. For instance, a single Instagram story may combine elements of journalism, personal storytelling, and advocacy. This blending is prevalent, as will be demonstrated in the analysis, which is why this is classified as a combined label.
4. **Power Structures (F):** This label examines the larger systems and frameworks that influence discourse, such as social norms, institutions, and power relations. It involves analyzing how the dynamics of the Israel-Gaza war shape and are shaped by influencers' narratives, reflecting the broader socio-political context. Influencers use their platforms to navigate and challenge these structures, revealing and critiquing systemic injustices and power imbalances through their language and content.
5. **Hegemony/Challenging Dominant Narratives (F, J):** This highlights how power is maintained not just through force but by shaping beliefs and perceptions. For example, how influencers strive to shape public opinion and gather support through their posts, making certain ideas appear natural and inevitable. This label will cover how influencers counter mainstream media representations and dominant narratives.
6. **Structure and Agency (J):** This label examines how influencers navigate and challenge the limitations set by social media platforms in the form of algorithms and moderation policies. It focuses on the interaction between the established rules, systems, and frameworks (structure) and the influencers' capacity to act independently and creatively within those confines (agency). For example, using coded language to avoid censorship while still conveying their messages.
7. **Identity Construction (J):** This looks at how a collective Palestinian identity is built through posts using cultural symbols and historical references and language in general. For example, fostering a sense of solidarity and resistance through shared cultural symbols like the Palestinian flag or references to the Nakba.



9. **Mobilization and Advocacy (F, J):** This examines how influencers use their platforms to inspire their audience to act. For example, posts calling for protests, sharing petitions, or encouraging followers to spread awareness.

These labels allow for a systematic analysis of how Palestinian influencers create and communicate their narratives through their posts, challenge mainstream media portrayals, and engage their audiences in the context of the Israel-Gaza war.

The labels often overlap because the concepts are complex and closely connected. While this framework simplifies and distills the rich theories of Jabri and Fairclough, it provides a practical approach to analyzing the dynamic and contested nature of discourses in the context of the Israel-Gaza war. This necessary simplification helps to operationalize the analysis without compromising the core insights of the original theories.

3.4 Case Selection: Palestinian Influencers' Profiles

The following section offers an overview of the Instagram profiles and feeds used in this study. This preliminary overview aims to identify the profiles under examination, with a detailed analysis of their content to be presented in a subsequent chapter.

These three influencers are chosen for their significant roles in shaping and disseminating narratives about the Israeli war on Gaza 2023-2024 on Instagram. Their selection is grounded in the theoretical understanding of influencers and citizen journalism as discussed in the literature. **Firstly**, the chosen influencers have a reach of over one million followers making them all three mega-influencers. Their reach is further evidenced by the high level of interaction their posts receive, including numerous likes, shares, and comments. **Secondly**, in addition to their status as influencers, the selected individuals also embody the characteristics of citizen journalists. These influencers engage in the gathering, preparation, and dissemination of news and information, focusing on what happens in Gaza or topics that may not receive extensive or the right coverage in mainstream media, thereby providing a broader and more nuanced perspective on the war. By operating independently and without affiliation with traditional news organizations, these influencers represent the evolving definition of journalism in the realm of citizen journalism. This makes them ideal subjects for analyzing how Palestinian influencers use discourse to construct and communicate their narratives on Instagram, shaping and influencing public perception within this social media platform. Furthermore, their profile description will underscore their credibility.

Motaz Azaiza

Starting off with the photojournalist **Motaz Azaiza**, on Instagram **motaz_azaiza**, who

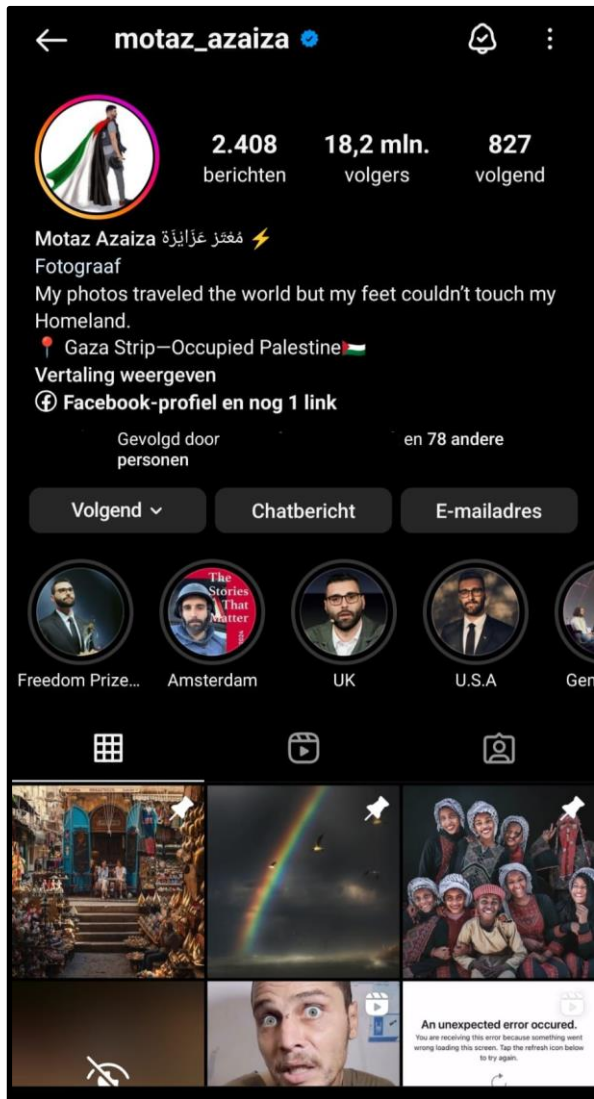


Image 2

was born in 1999 in the Deir al-Balah Camp in the Gaza Strip. On 7 October, Motaz's Instagram page only had 25,000 followers before the war. Today that number has reached over 18 million followers. It is evident that he has gained prominence due to his powerful coverage of the Israel-Gaza war. Motaz uses Instagram to share his work which consists of photos vividly capturing the harsh realities faced by Palestinians during the war, bringing a human perspective to the situation, all while garnering global recognition, raising awareness about the situation in Gaza and advocating for the Palestinian cause.⁵⁷

His work has been acknowledged through prestigious awards, including the Communicator Award at the TRT World Citizen Awards and the 2023 Impact Awards Winner at the Lucie Awards. His photo was also included in TIME's top 10 of 2023 and his work has often been featured in various media outlets such as World Press Photo. In January 2024 Motaz fled Gaza and shifted his focus to raising awareness and advocating for international intervention on the Palestinian issue from abroad.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Abubaker Abed, "The Unsung Hero: Meeting Motaz Azaiza, Gaza's Window to the World," *The New Arab*, November 7, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/features/motaz-azaiza-gazas-window-world>.

⁵⁸ Zeena Saifi, Don Riddell, and Brooke Jenner, "Why Motaz Azaiza, the Palestinian Photographer Who Captured the War, Chose to Leave Gaza," *CNN*, March 5, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/01/world/why-motaz-azaiza-chose-to-leave-gaza-mime-intl/index.html>.



Plestia Alaqad

The second journalistic Palestinian influencer is **Plestia Alaqad**, born in Gaza on 10

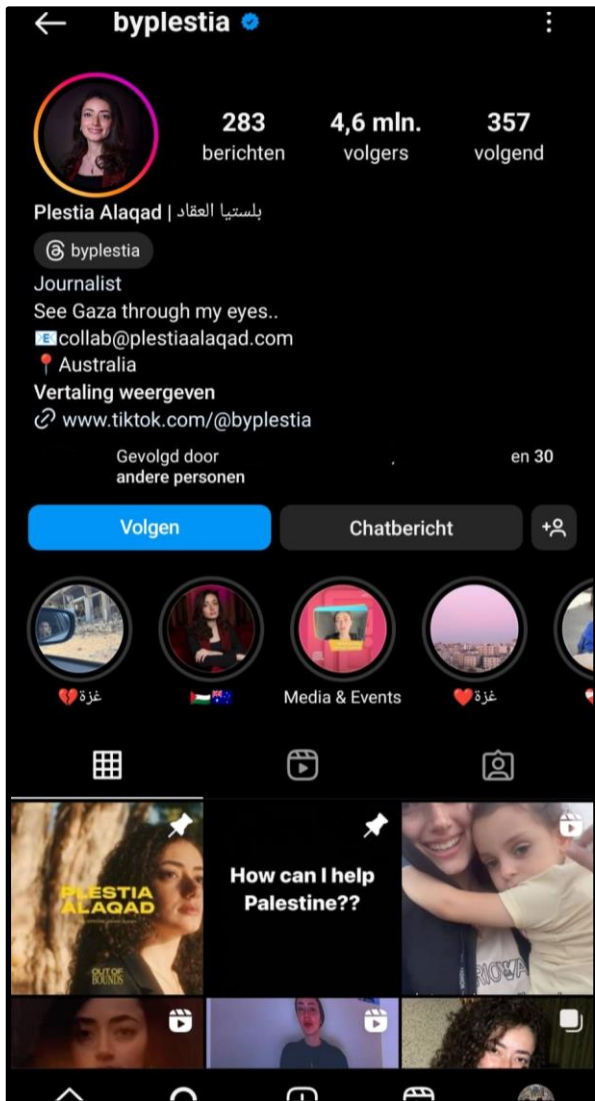


Image 3

December 2001, known on Instagram as **byplestia** with 4.6 million followers.⁵⁹ It took only a few weeks into the war before her account reached millions of followers. People started to recognize her, asking her to share their stories with the world. Her Instagram stories, in addition to documenting the war, often showcased the resilience and humanity of the people of Gaza, aiming to counter negative stereotypes.⁶⁰ Plestia is more than a journalist, she is also a poet and uses her writing to express her experiences and emotions. Both her work and story have been featured in various media outlets like Reuters, The New Arab, and Outlook Magazine at the American University of Beirut. Plestia and her family left Gaza on 22 November 2023, to find refuge in Melbourne, Australia.⁶¹ While both Alaqad and Azaiza played significant roles in using social media to raise awareness about the situation in Gaza, there are some key differences between them. First, Alaqad appears to be more focused on the human stories and cultural aspects of Gaza, while Motaz's work leans more towards photojournalism capturing the conflict's immediate impact. Furthermore, Azaiza is actively involved in global travel and advocacy, while Alaqad focuses on advocacy for

Gaza, as well as education and writing.

⁵⁹ "Inside Gaza: Palestinian Journalist, 22, Says 'It's Massacre, Complete Genocide,'" *ITV News*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-10-11/inside-gaza-palestinian-journalist-says-its-massacre-complete-genocide>.

⁶⁰ Kevin Sieff, "An Aspiring Journalist Documented Gaza's Beauty, Then Its Destruction," *Washington Post*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/28/gaza-journalist-plestia-alaqad-instagram-palestine/>.

⁶¹ Alex Woodward, "Palestinian Journalist Plestia Alaqad Flees Gaza: 'I Hope This Nightmare Ends,'" *Yahoo News*, updated November 22, 2023, https://www.yahoo.com/news/palestinian-journalist-plestia-alaqad-flees-190903312.html?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnLw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAAYQpQvtvAPZ72EJVifgZ1_D7OoD7_Tm4w-2uLF39wk9mJ9BNLHvIPTf1Ni3e9zS_YGcdxNUTVrf4DyHxbyvKH1IFRFsmtah5gI16SZRc92_IZSEjFKaGHyX-RAG0YT7sEgG1gM5aOcLv037qd2wSCD5Za6zQhucudivdu7Qki6.



Bisan Owda

The last prominent Palestinian woman is **Bisan Owda** who goes by **@wizard_bisan1** on

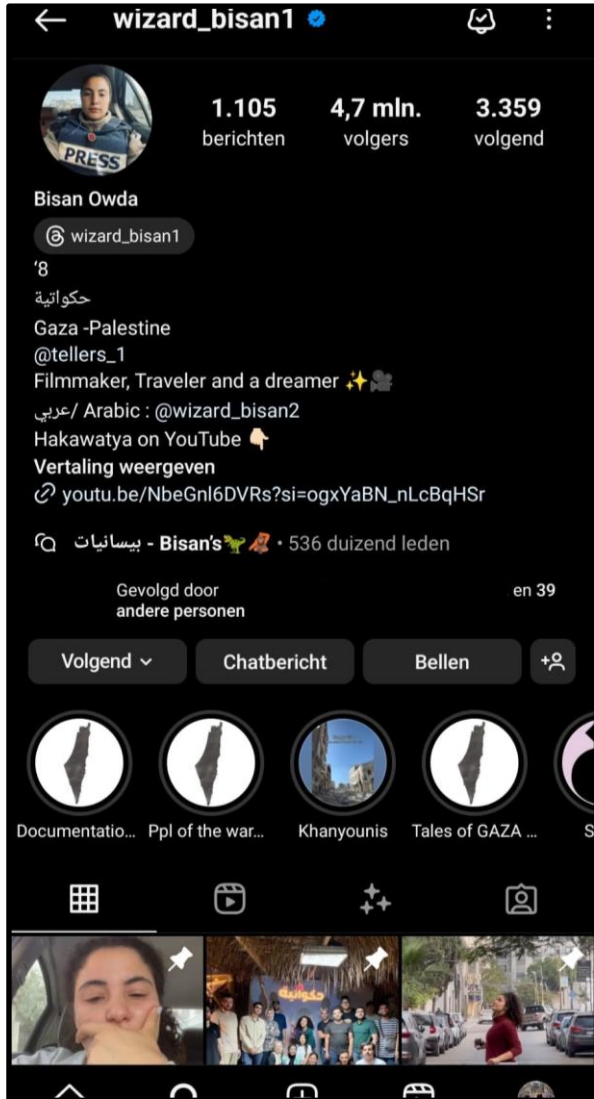


Image 4

Instagram and has 4.7 million followers. As of October 15, 2023, Bisan had accumulated over 180,000 followers on Instagram showcasing the growth of followers.⁶² Born and raised in Gaza, her creations display the struggles and realities faced by Palestinians. She utilizes Instagram to share mostly videos and updates about the war, offering viewers a firsthand look at the situation in Gaza. In addition to actively highlighting current events, she shares her stories through traditional oral storytelling infused with a modern twist, calling it *Hakawatya*⁶³ with what she becomes a modern-day *Hakawati*⁶⁴. Bisan's *Hakawatya* resonates with audiences of all ages, bridging the gap between the past and the present, and instilling a sense of cultural pride.⁶⁵ Furthermore, for her work in her Al Jazeera Media Network show, "It's Bisan from Gaza and I'm Still Alive.", she won a 2024 Peabody Award in the News category.⁶⁶ Till this day Bisan remains in Gaza while documenting and sharing Palestinian stories showing what survival looks like for her and the masses around her, to keep the world informed of the day-to-day reality on the ground in Gaza.

⁶² Paul Donnison, "One Week in Gaza: 'There Are No Safe Places Here'," *BBC News*, October 15, 2023, archived from the original on November 7, 2023, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67090264>.

⁶³ Referring to a series or collection of stories presented by a storyteller. It signifies the art of storytelling in Arab culture.

⁶⁴ This term refers to a traditional Arab storyteller, someone who narrates tales, often of historical or cultural significance, in a captivating and engaging manner.

⁶⁵ "The Dreamer and Timeless *Hakawatya*," *South EU Neighbourhood*, <https://south.euneighbours.eu/ecard/bisan-owda/>.

⁶⁶ Erik Pedersen, "Peabody Award Winners Include 'The Bear', 'Last Of Us', 'Reservation Dogs' & 'Bluey'; Special Honor For 'Star Trek' Franchise," *Deadline*, May 9, 2024, <https://deadline.com/2024/05/peabody-award-winners-2024-list-star-trek-1235909446/>.

4. Palestinian Influencers' Content (Analysis)

This chapter analyzes the content of the three selected profiles using the analytical framework with labels, based on Fairclough's CDA, enhanced by Jabri's conflict analysis approach. An overall impression of the types of posts will be provided, followed by a focus on posts related to Israeli content and circumvention, setting the stage to address the sub-question later in the thesis.

Please note that some content is graphic.

“and free Palestine”

Motaz has made over 2,400 posts, with two hundred of them shared since 7 October 2023. The first post following this date discusses Israel's response to Hamas' bombing. While he was still in Gaza, his posts were notably descriptive and journalistic, featuring images accompanied by detailed captions that explain the events or, at times, lacking captions altogether, as seen in image six. In the initial post (image 5), Motaz explicitly refers to Israeli forces as "occupation."



Image 5



Image 6



This word choice challenges the dominant media narrative, which often portrays Israeli military actions as necessary security measures to protect the state of Israel from terrorism and threats, emphasizing Israel's right to defend itself, potentially downplaying the experiences and suffering of Palestinians.⁶⁷ This illustrates that **Language and Ideology and Hegemony (F)** are embedded in his choice of words/language use. By labeling these actions as "occupation," Palestinian influencers underscore the prolonged and oppressive nature of Israeli control over Palestinian territories, reframing the war to highlight the systemic issues of control, domination, and deprivation faced by Palestinians. Moreover, this use of terminology further highlights **Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity (F)**, as it draws connections between past and present instances of oppression and integrates various discourses to strengthen their narrative. Additionally, this reveals and critiques systemic injustices and power imbalances, clearly illustrating **Power Structures (F)** at play. Motaz shifts the focus from a security-centric narrative to one that underscores the impact of Israeli actions on Palestinian lives. This not only humanizes the Palestinian experience but also calls into question the morality and legality of the Israeli response. In turn, this demonstrates the use of **Emotive Language (F)**, as it aims to foster empathy and solidarity by highlighting the human impact.

When not reporting events, Motaz uses his posts to express the struggles and emotions of living in Gaza, often appealing to the world to end the suffering and to remind everyone of their cause: Free Palestine (as seen in image 7). By consistently advocating for the cause of Palestine, Motaz engages in **Mobilization and Advocacy (F, J)**, as he inspires his audience to act and support their struggle; this can be seen in image 8 on the next page.

⁶⁷ Example mainstream media: NOS Nieuws, "Internationaal Gerechtshof: Israël moet offensief in Rafah stoppen," *NOS*, May 24, 2024, <https://nos.nl/collectie/13959/artikel/2521717-internationaal-gerechtshof-israel-moet-offensief-in-rafah-stoppen>.



Image 7



Image 8

The caption in image 7 says: “Staying alive is more stressful than dying! At least when you die you will not feel a thing. We never had a choice, and the day we try to choose is about choosing to stay and die or to leave and lose your dignity and everything you worked to build. Most of Palestinians born to be one of those: A martyr, prisoner, detained, or living with a big suffer.” This can be analyzed across several key areas of the analytical framework. Motaz’s use of language here powerfully conveys his **ideological (F)** stance of resistance and the dire circumstances faced by Palestinians. His emphasis on the hardship Palestinians face is part of a discourse that is widely used. For this, I zoom into the following posts of Jewish Voice for Peace (see images 9-11 on the next page).



Image 9

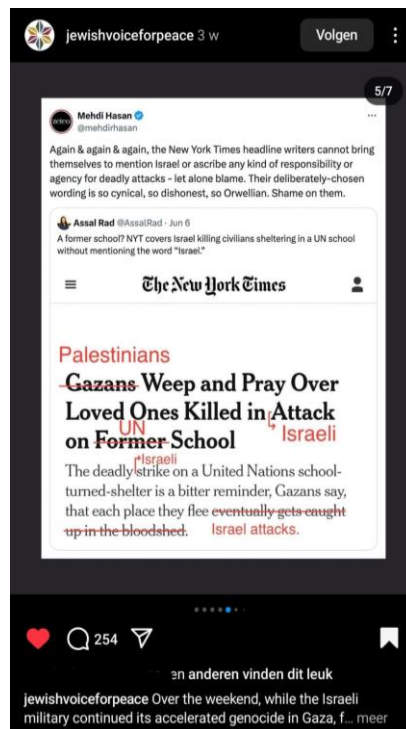


Image 10

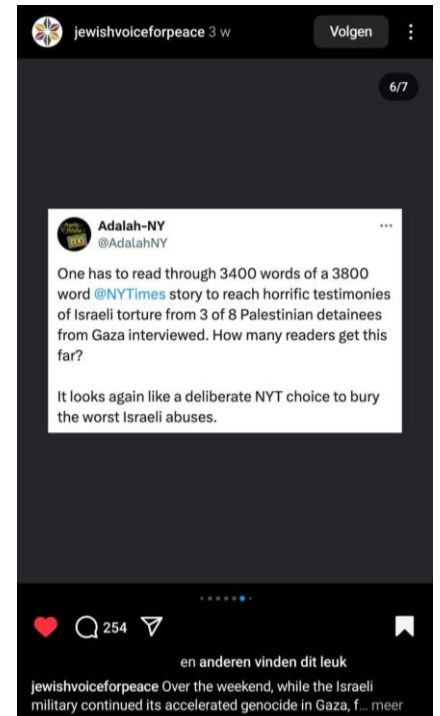


Image 11

On 8 June 2024, Israeli forces conducted a raid in Gaza to rescue four hostages held by Hamas since October 2023. The operation, which took place in the densely populated al-Nuseirat area, resulted in more than two hundred Palestinian deaths, making it one of the deadliest Israeli assaults in the ongoing war. The hostages, Noa Argamani, Almog Meir Jan, Andrey Kozlov, and Shlomi Ziv, were all taken from the Nova music festival during a Hamas raid on 7 October 2023. During the rescue, an Israeli special forces commander was killed, and the raid left many casualties in a local marketplace and mosque.⁶⁸

The posts address the framing of the described event by mainstream media, highlighting the terms used. This reflects the concepts of **Hegemony/Challenging Dominant Narratives (F, J)** and **Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity (F)**, as well as **Identity Construction (J)**. The content critiques the framing by news outlets, incorporates their texts, and emphasizes the Palestinian identity. The narrative shifts the focus to the geographical and administrative entity of Gaza rather than the national identity of Palestine. By referring to individuals as "Gazans," it can deny or downplay the existence of Palestine as a state, highlighting **Power Structures (F)**. Although many countries and international organizations recognize Palestine as a state, it lacks full sovereignty and universal recognition. Additionally, the omission of explicitly

⁶⁸ Maayan Lubell and Nidal Al-Mughrabi, "Israel Rescues Four Hostages in Gaza Raid That Hamas Says Kills 210 Palestinians," *Reuters*, June 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-rescues-four-hostages-gaza-palestinians-say-50-dead-israeli-assault-2024-06-08/>.



naming Israel in reports of attacks on Gaza is a strategic move to save face. This indirect framing technique preserves a more favorable or neutral image of Israel in the eyes of international audiences, demonstrating **Hegemony (F)**. By not directly attributing the violence to Israel, these narratives can downplay the aggressor's responsibility, thereby mitigating the perceived severity of the actions taken and aligning with broader diplomatic or political objectives.

Returning to the post of Motaz, phrases like "staying alive is more stressful than dying" and "born to be one of those: a martyr, prisoner, detained, or living with a big suffer" serve as **Emotive Language (F)** practices that vividly depict the harsh realities and emotional toll on Palestinians. By portraying the life of Palestinians in such stark terms, Motaz challenges dominant narratives that downplay or ignore the extent of the suffering experienced, as seen in the latest example above. His language serves to counterbalance more neutral or biased portrayals in mainstream media, which exemplifies **Challenging Dominant Narratives (F)**.

Furthermore, this personal narrative links individual suffering to collective experience, fostering a sense of shared identity and struggle among his followers and others suffering, highlighting **Identity Construction (J)**. By openly discussing these harsh realities, Motaz positions himself as a voice for the oppressed, directly addressing power dynamics, positioning Israeli authorities as oppressors, and critiquing the systemic injustice, illustrating **Agency (J) and Power Dynamics (F)**.

All of his posts are focused on reporting the realities of Gaza, with much of his content flagged as sensitive for his followers due to its graphic nature. Motaz faces numerous moderations for his content for different policy reasons, illustrating the interaction between established rules and systems (**structure J**) and his capacity to act independently and creatively within those confines (**agency J**). In case of image 12 the caption relevant to moderation says: "It's been three days for @instagram removing my Documentations for the Israeli genocide against my people. It's really unacceptable !! They first fired a Meta engineer just for doing his job !! They accused him of knowing me personally which is not and now they are removing my posts, post after post! Im asking for some support, help to stop them from removing my posts."

Moreover, image 13 shows: "Am I shooting Nudes or what ? A lot of naked girls keeps posting on instagram which is (normal for them) and I don't see them removing any of their content! But showing what kids of Palestine are facing in Gaza is nudity and sexual activity? Tell me If im right or wrong"

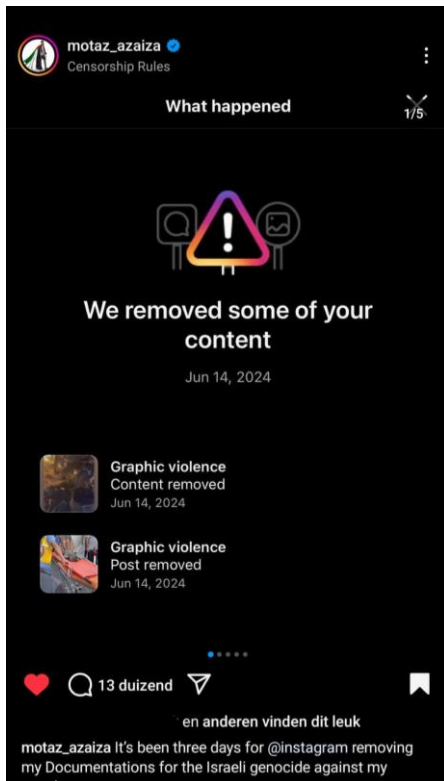


Image 12

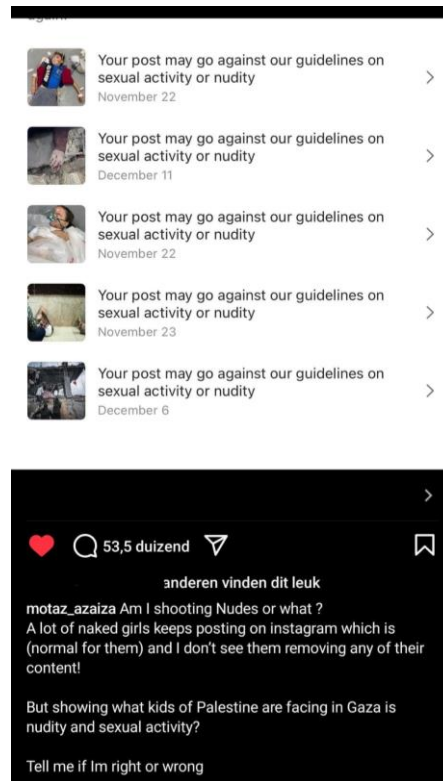


Image 13

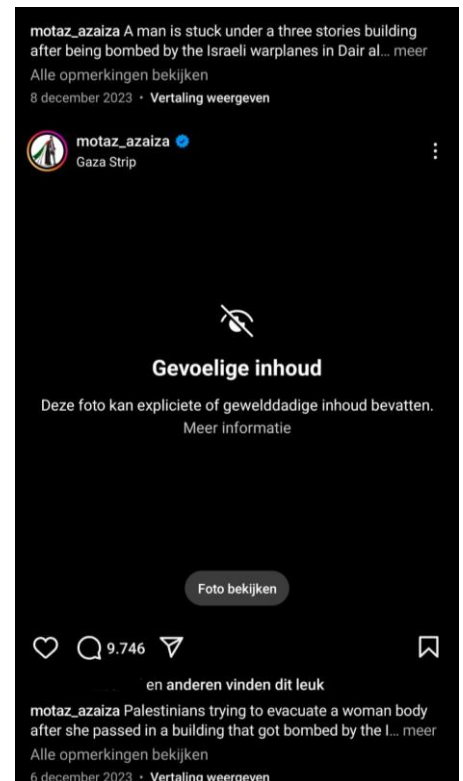


Image 14

Motaz's caption in image 13 reveals his frustration with Meta's moderation policies, portraying a struggle against perceived censorship and bias. This highlights the structural challenges Palestinian influencers, and users in general, face on social media platforms, where content critical of Israeli actions is often moderated or removed. By explicitly calling out what he sees as double standards—comparing the removal of his posts to the allowance of other content he finds inappropriate—Motaz exposes potential biases in content moderation practices, emphasizing the need for fairness and transparency, reflecting **Structure and Agency (J)**. Furthermore, his plea for support and help to stop the removal of his posts signifies an active attempt to mobilize his audience to challenge these structural limitations, fostering a collective resistance and demonstrating **Mobilization and Advocacy (F, J)**. Motaz's language and tone in these posts also serve to frame the issue of content removal as part of a broader narrative of injustice, framing Instagram's actions as part of the systemic oppression faced by Palestinians. The emotional appeal in his posts, especially through the use of rhetorical questions and vivid comparisons, seeks to evoke a strong emotional response from his followers, enhancing the affective impact of his message (**Emotive Language F**).

After fleeing Gaza, Motaz continues to post about Palestine, now from the perspective of his activities outside Gaza, all aimed at advocating for the Palestinian cause. This shift in

location highlights his persistent dedication to the cause, demonstrating **Mobilization and Advocacy (F, J)** and **Structure and Agency (J)** as he uses his platform to continue raising awareness and rallying support.

Motaz posts a video on 20 February 2024 made together with the New York Times that sums up his work while in Gaza: reports, his struggles, losses, dreams, objectives, and his life ([Motaz's interview](#)). This video exemplifies **Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity (F)** by blending journalistic reporting with personal storytelling and advocacy.

Going from place to place, speaking on news channels like CNN and TRT World, and meeting with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (see image 15 and 16), Motaz continues to frame his narrative within a broader context, emphasizing **Challenging Dominant Narratives (F, J)**. His narrative continues to build a collective identity of resistance and resilience, reinforcing **Identity Construction (J)** through his ongoing efforts to represent and advocate for Palestinian rights and experiences.



Image 15



Image 16

The analysis of Motaz's activities and posts after fleeing Gaza reveals additional layers of his discursive practices. In these posts, Motaz not only shares his story but also calls on his audience to spread news and act, demonstrating **Mobilization and Advocacy (F, J)**. By encouraging his audience to act (see image 15), he leverages his platform to amplify the impact of his message and to foster a collective effort towards achieving their shared goals.

It is not until the 7th of May when Motaz shares a video on his account that shows two clips of Israeli tanks flattening the “Gaza” and then the “I love Gaza” sign while shootings happen (see image 18). The caption along the video says: “Israeli army invaded Rafah crossing and they are literally 50 meters away from the Egyptian gate. No body can travel or evacuate anymore.” The reuse of the video depicting the tanks adds an element of **Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity (F)**, as it highlights another perspective; that of the victim. Later, on 5 June 2024, he shared a press release from the Israeli embassy in France (see image 17), which called Motaz a terrorist and asked to withdraw the prize he received earlier. This post reflects the broader power dynamics at play and highlights the attempts by Israeli authorities to discredit and delegitimize Palestinian voices, illustrating **Power Structures (F)**. By sharing this press release, Motaz challenges these accusations and reinforces his identity as a legitimate and influential advocate for the Palestinian cause. The incorporation of the official document from the Israeli embassy demonstrates **Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity (F)**, as it integrates external texts into his narrative to provide evidence and bolster his claims.



Image 17



Image 18

Overall, this multifaceted approach, combining personal storytelling and high-level advocacy, underscores the complexity and depth of Motaz's discursive practices. It demonstrates his ability to amplify his message, continually shaping the narrative around the Palestinian struggle.

“All people have homes to live in except for us, we have a home that lives in our hearts </3.”

Next, an analysis of the content of Palestinian influencer Plestia Alaqad will be conducted. Alaqad has posted significantly fewer times, with a total of 284 posts, of which 234 were made after 7 October 2023, marking the beginning of her documentation of events in Gaza. Her first post, shared on October 8, 2023, provides a reflection on the recent events in the region. Plestia's feed consists of various types of posts, including updates on the war, where



Image 19

she explains her situation or that of her fellow Palestinians in Gaza. She often posts videos and asks short questions about how they experience war and life, as seen in the following video post screenshot where Plestia visits a UNRWA school which is being used as a shelter (see image 19). The caption says: “I took this video a couple of days ago.. People are using the UNRWA schools as shelters as they're left with no other options after their houses got bombed..What breaks my heart the most is kids.. seeing a kid smiling or laughing even for just a few minutes instantly makes me feel better <3 No words can express what I'm feeling or what every Palestinian is feeling right now.. Day 10 I guess” This post exemplifies Plestia's skillful use of personal narrative and **Emotive Language (F)** to convey the dire circumstances faced by Palestinians. By highlighting the smiles of children amidst the devastation, she humanizes the war, making it relatable on a universal emotional level and fostering empathy among her followers. This approach also reinforces a collective identity, showcasing **Identity Construction (J)** by connecting individual experiences to the larger Palestinian struggle, emphasizing the broader humanitarian crisis.

She further reports on events, such as the October 20, 2023 airstrike on a Greek Orthodox church in the Gaza Strip, which was sheltering hundreds of displaced Palestinians



Image 20

and resulted in 16 deaths.⁶⁹ These reports are not meant only for Instagram hearing her greet her audience with “Marhaba Blinx” (welcome Blinx: to users of Blinx platform⁷⁰) saying: “Yesterday Israeli warplanes targeted Church of Saint Porphyrius.. Around 17 were killed... and there are still victims under the rubble..” Her direct language—mentioning “Israeli warplanes” and “targeted”—emphasizes the deliberate impact on civilian structures. The event's relevance is heightened by the reference to the Church of Saint Porphyrius, which weaves in cultural resonance and **Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity (F)**, highlighting the rich and diverse history of the Palestinian people (see image 20). Additionally, this event brings to light that Palestinians include not only Muslims but also Christians, who are equally affected by the violence. This underscores the collective Palestinian identity and the indiscriminate

nature of the attacks, revealing the underlying **Power Structures (F)** and contributing to **Identity Construction (J)**. By depicting Israeli forces as aggressors and Palestinians as victims, Plestia accentuates **power dynamics** and engages her audience on both **emotional** and **ideological** levels, fostering a deeper understanding of the conflict.

Moreover, Plestia combats misinformation (see image 21) on her account by referring to the Instagram account kashifpov, a Palestinian initiative, which fact-checks content, verifies information at both local and international levels, offering services in English and Arabic and invites individuals to submit information for fact-checking. This role is particularly crucial during times of conflict when misinformation can easily spread. This emphasis on verification

⁶⁹ Nidal Al-Mughrabi, "Orthodox Church Says It Was Hit by Israeli Air Strike in Gaza," *Reuters*, October 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/orthodox-church-says-it-was-hit-by-israeli-air-strike-gaza-2023-10-20/>.

⁷⁰ Blinx is a news platform that uses artificial intelligence to deliver personalized news content to users based on their interests and reading habits. It aims to provide relevant and engaging news stories tailored to individual preferences: Staff Writer, "Digital Platform Blinx Registers 184m Users Since September Launch," *BroadcastPro ME*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.broadcastprome.com/news/digital-platform-blinx-registers-184-million-users-since-september-launch/>.



underscores an ideological commitment to truth and accuracy in communication, countering the manipulation of narratives, adds to her authenticity, and showcases **Language and Ideology (F)**. It also represents a form of discursive practice, actively **challenging (F)** and correcting false narratives to ensure that discourse around the Israel-Gaza war and Israel-Palestine conflict is grounded in verifiable facts. Additionally, the account asserts its agency by challenging dominant narratives that aim to delegitimize Palestinian suffering, playing a critical role in the power dynamics of narrative construction and ensuring that Palestinian voices are accurately represented and heard, embodying **Structure and Agency (J)**. This emphasis on verification is particularly important in the context of accusations like "Pallywood," a term used to dismiss videos showing Israeli violence or Palestinian suffering as fraudulent or staged, further illustrating the platform's role in maintaining narrative integrity.⁷¹

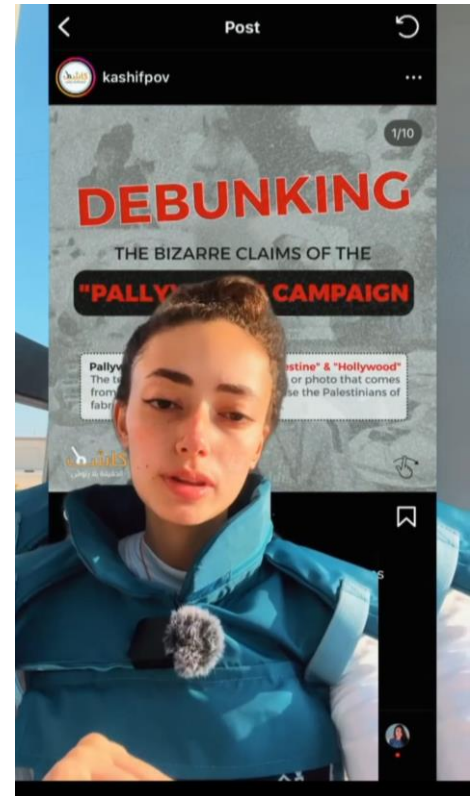


Image 21

Additionally, to her diverse posts, she shows her poetic side by posting pages from her journal or written poems. Despite her condition she tries to remain positive and see the good in people (see image 22 and 23).



Image 22

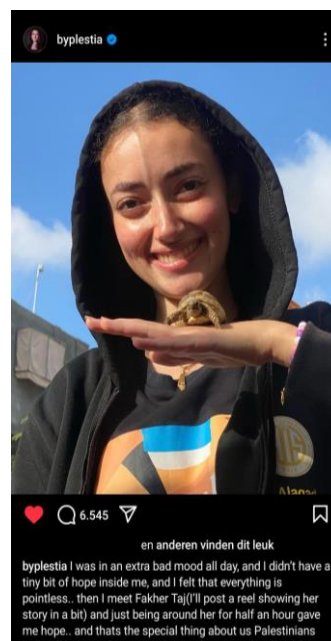


Image 23

⁷¹ Olga Robinson and Shayan Sardarizadeh, "False Claims of Staged Deaths Surge in Israel-Gaza War," *BBC Verify*, December 22, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67760523>.



One caption reads (image 23): “I was in an extra bad mood all day, and I didn't have a tiny bit of hope inside me, and I felt that everything is pointless.. then I meet Fagher Taj (I'll post a reel showing her story in a bit) and just being around her for half an hour gave me hope.. and that's the special thing about us Palestinians we're all living in this genocide together, yet we're all uplifting each other ❤️❤️ This is her turtle and we named her Plestia.” This reflects her resilience and the communal spirit among Palestinians, highlighting her positive nature even in dire circumstances, contributing to **Identity Construction (J)** of Palestinians. Moreover, Plestia frequently references past aggressions, linking current events to a broader historical context. This use of historical references exemplifies **Intertextuality and Discursivity (F)**, as she draws connections between past and present struggles to reinforce the ongoing narrative of Palestinian resilience. For example, she writes (image 22): “I remember writing this during a previous aggression.. Only in Gaza.. a genocide happens and the world doesn't care.. doesn't do anything.. I lost faith in humanity..”

The **Intertextuality and Discursivity (F)** is further evident in her posts like these two (image

24 and 25). The caption: “It's been 75 years of occupation.. our struggles as Palestinian people didn't start on the 7th of October.. I know it's been too long, but don't get bored of talking and posting about Palestine.. we Palestinian need your voice and support.. Don't leave Palestine and Palestinians alone..”.

Furthermore, by referring to other aggressions, she situates the current war within a historical continuum of violence and resistance, reinforcing a collective Palestinian identity and struggle, showcasing **Identity Construction (J)**. This approach encourages her followers to view the current events as part of a long-standing pattern of oppression. Additionally, it challenges **Dominant Narratives (F, J)** that may overlook the historical context of the conflict, urging followers not to forget or abandon the Palestinian cause.



Image 24

Image 25 with caption saying: “We're in 2024, but we're living 1948 Al-Nakba again and maybe

even worse. In 100 days, Israel has destroyed more than 70% of houses in Gaza.. and has killed more than 23,000 Palestinians.. Gaza can't handle another 100 days of this genocide!! We demand a ceasefire!!”

Beside the prominent intertextuality as mentioned before, Plestia's use of the word "genocide" in her posts is a choice that reflects her strong stance on the war, despite the term not being officially designated by all international bodies. This usage aligns with the findings of UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese, who reported reasonable grounds to believe that Israel's actions in Gaza meet the threshold for genocide.⁷² By labeling the war as a genocide, Plestia tries to underscore the severity of the situation and aligns her narrative with a broader discourse on human rights violations and international law, demanding a ceasefire; showcasing **Language and Ideology (F)** as discursive practices.

Plestia's style is characterized by her stirring use of emotive language and personal narratives. Through her moving posts and

videos, she effectively humanizes the war, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding among her audience.



Image 25

⁷² Francesca Albanese, "Rights expert finds 'reasonable grounds' genocide is being committed in Gaza," *UN News*, March 26, 2024, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147976>.

“Hi this is Bisan from Gaza and I am still alive.”

Moving on to the third and final Palestinian influencer, Bisan Owda, who is highly active with 549 posts since 7 October 2023. Most of her posts are videos longer than a minute, providing substantial content for analysis. That which is analyzed for Bisan is not easy to be found when looking for words in captions but rather in her words spoken in her videos.

Bisan immediately starts sharing updates on the war, showing people evacuating and what her daily life looks like; struggling to find a safe place, water, food and being displaced a couple of times but also how she finds hope in the way Palestinians adapt to their lives in shelters or in the street letting no one deprive them of life. Her captions often function as a title such as: “Hope in the SHELTER”, reflecting her storyteller side. Her content shares similarities with the other Palestinian influencers during their time in Gaza, including being flagged as sensitive. Bisan too frequently uses terms like "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," and "massacre," as seen in the screenshots (see images 26-29). Despite remaining in Gaza to this day, Bisan, like Motaz and Plestia, actively calls on people to raise their voices for Palestinians.



Image 26



Image 27



Image 28

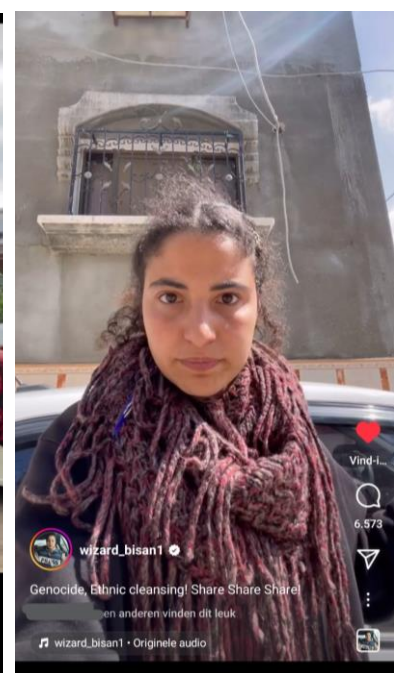


Image 29

When Bisan humanizes Palestinians by showing how they live, suffer, and remain hopeful, she effectively brings a personal and relatable dimension to the war. This approach challenges the abstract or impersonal portrayals often seen in dominant media narratives, where events are reduced to numbers of nameless corps. By presenting the everyday realities and

resilience of Palestinians, Bisan uses **Emotive Language (F)** to create a connection with her audience and fostering empathy.

Her use of terms like "genocide," "massacre," and "ethnic cleansing" serves to frame the war in a way that emphasizes its severity and moral urgency. These charged words draw international attention and condemnation, pushing her audience to recognize the gravity of the situation. With this strategic language she aligns the war with a broader discourse on human rights violations and international law, showcasing **Language and Ideology (F)**.

Additionally, Bisan's posts frequently mention powers like the UN and the US (image 30 and 31). Her references to the UN highlight the need for international intervention and humanitarian aid, reflecting the impact of **Power Structures (F)** on the crisis in Gaza. By mentioning the US, particularly in the context of its veto against the ceasefire, she critiques the political dimensions (**Hegemony**) of the war and the international **power dynamics** that affect Gaza, emphasizing the **Intertextuality and Discursivity (F)** of local and global narratives.

Moreover, by calling on her audience to raise their voices and act, Bisan uses her platform to mobilize support and advocate for systemic change, embodying **Mobilization and Advocacy (F, J)**.



Image 30

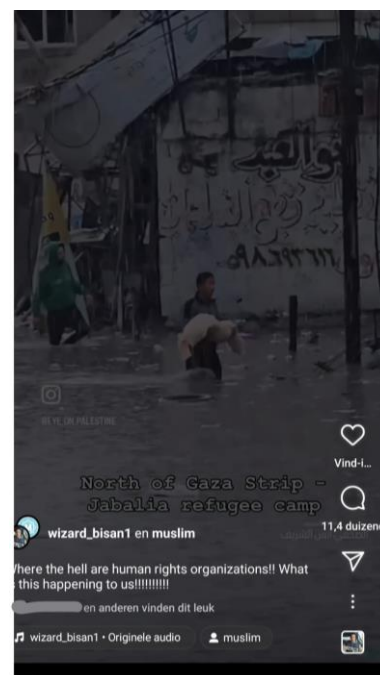


Image 31

What distinguishes Bisan from the others is her expressiveness (image 33) and directness (even using irony: see “winter is coming” in image 32). She is unafraid to show her emotions and her expressiveness is evident in her face, voice, and tears. Her directness is visible in the video(s) where she asks her audience direct questions (such as “what is your night

routine?”), demonstrating her ability to use her platform to communicate openly and personally, engaging with her audience in a way that asserts her individuality and perspective (**Agency J**). In this case she asks: “What do you think about when I say winter is coming? you probably think about your favorite series...” Her communication style enables her to capture the attention of her audience and can be described as aligning with the notion of **Emotive Language (F)**.



Image 32



Image 33

Another significant aspect of Bisan's approach is her explicit framing of Israel as responsible for various wrongdoings, highlighting alleged war crimes and the targeting of hospitals, medical staff (image 37), infrastructure (image 35), and civilian homes. By addressing these issues directly, she actively debunks and challenges Israeli and other narratives, exemplifying **Challenging Dominant Narratives (F)** and **Power Structures (F)**. For instance, in image 34, Bisan critiques The Guardian for referring to Palestinian children as "people under the age of 18" while using the term "children" for Israelis, pointing out the biased language that dehumanizes Palestinian youth. In image 36, Bisan highlights the discrepancy between Israeli claims of targeting terrorist houses and the reality of bombed civilian homes, further exposing the impact on innocent lives. This approach embodies a strong sense of **Agency (J)**, as Bisan actively participates in shaping the narrative and influencing how her audience perceives the war. By doing so, she not only **counters dominant media** portrayals



but also empowers her followers to critically assess the information they receive, reinforcing a collective identity and shared understanding of the conflict.



Image 34



Image 35



Image 36



Image 37

Also worth mentioning is her inclusion of people with disabilities in her videos, interacting with Deaf people and those with Down syndrome.

Bisan Owda's posts consistently humanize the Palestinian experience, portraying the daily struggles and resilience of those in Gaza with direct and expressive language. Her content highlights Israeli actions, challenges dominant narratives, and calls for global support, making her a powerful and impactful voice in the war.



4.1 Similarities and Differences

After analyzing almost 1000 posts of the three Palestinian influencers, several similarities and differences in their discursive practices are identified.

Similarities: All three influencers aim to raise global awareness and reveal the truth (e.g., Bisan: “This is what you don't know about Gaza”) about the Israeli-Gaza war. They do so by documenting daily life during the war in the form of video updates and pictures of events fostering empathy and solidarity among their followers, mobilizing support by asking people around the world to stand for Palestine, and countering narratives that misrepresent their situation by debunking narratives and misinformation like ‘Pallywood’. They utilize their personal stories or of those next to them by interviewing them, showing people and stating their name, acknowledging them as a unique individual and humanizing their experience, ensuring their personal identity is recognized.

The use of emotive language was present in many posts (not all of them, Motaz happens to be very descriptive of events) like when Motaz says, "Staying alive is more stressful than dying!" to convey extreme stress, or express frustration. Similarly, Plestia humanizing Palestinians while using historical intertextuality "I remember writing this during a previous aggression..." Or Bisan's direct language when she asks, "What do you think about when I say winter is coming?" Contrasting everyday experiences with life in Gaza and the rest of the world, or when she movingly captures survival and resilience with, "Hi, this is Bisan from Gaza and I am still alive.". In their use of terms like "genocide," "ethnic cleansing," and "massacre," all three influencers—Bisan, Motaz, and Plestia—clearly convey their stance and perspective. These words reflect their strong condemnation of the actions taken against Palestinians and emphasize the severity of the situation. This consistent use of charged language highlights their unified perspective and their role in framing the narrative to challenge dominant media discourses and advocate for international awareness and support.

Differences: Despite these shared objectives and discourse, the influencers exhibit notable differences in their approaches. Motaz Azaiza's work is heavily photojournalistic, capturing the immediate impact of the war through powerful images. Plestia Alaqad, on the other hand, focuses more on human stories and cultural aspects, using her platform to showcase the resilience and cultural richness of Gaza. Her poetic style and reflections, such as her posts about meeting children in shelters, create a more intimate connection with her audience. Bisan Owda's approach is characterized by her directness and expressiveness, often using videos to



document her experiences and interact with her followers. Her emphasis on direct communication and emotional appeal effectively engages her audience and mobilizes support.

These key findings are embedded in the discourse analysis based on the theories of Fairclough and Jabri. This framework enabled me to understand how the framing of certain narratives aided in forming their discourse around the Israel-Gaza war, demonstrating that influencers can be pivotal actors in shaping discourses during and around a war.

4.2 Sub-questions

Turning our focus to the two analytical sub-questions: “How do Palestinian influencers engage with Israeli (authorities’) content?” And “Which strategies do Palestinian influencers use to circumvent censorship?”, the following can be argued.

Reflecting on the sub-questions, it quickly became clear that much of what was hypothetically assumed to be present in the posts was either absent or minimal. To circumvent Meta's moderation, the Palestinian influencers employed strategies such as alternative spellings and coded language such as ‘G@z@’. Such strategies were observed only a handful of times. In addition, contrary to expectations, the number of times Palestinian influencers engaged with Israeli content in their post was relatively low. When they did engage, it often involved critiquing and challenging Israeli narratives. This limited engagement suggests a strategic focus on emphasizing their own stories and perspectives rather than directly confronting Israeli content. Therefore, it is acceptable that the results of the sub-questions are minimal, as the analysis of the "regular" content was sufficiently comprehensive and demanding.

4.3 Patterns

During the analysis of the content, it became evident that much of the literature discussed in the first chapter was directly applicable to this case. As Mahmood Monshipouri and Theodore Prompichai discussed, the influencers aim to raise global awareness about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by documenting daily life and events under occupation/during war, mobilizing people for protests and campaigns, countering narratives they believe misrepresent their situation, and building solidarity with like-minded individuals and organizations worldwide. Furthermore, posts were observed on the topic of Israel cutting off the internet connection for Palestinians (see image 26), which reflects the concept of digital occupation by Israel.⁷³ It is important to note that the Palestinian influencers in this research faced significant

⁷³ Matthew Leake, "Palestinians Struggle to Connect and Get News Amid Digital Shutdowns in Gaza: 'Without the Internet Everything Stops'," *Reuters Institute*, March 6, 2024,



digital constraints, including content deletion, account restrictions, and being flagged as sensitive. These challenges align with findings from 7amleh, Human Rights Watch, and other organizations.



5. End of the Feed: Conclusion

In this research, I explored the discursive practices used by Palestinian influencers on Instagram during the Israel-Gaza war of 2023-2024 analyzing a total of 981 posts. In the following conclusion, the key findings answering the research question: “How do Palestinian social media influencers shape the war narrative on Instagram during the Israeli war on Gaza 2023-2024?” will be discussed and I reflect on my work.

5.1 Findings

The discourse analysis of Palestinian influencers Motaz Azaiza, Plestia Alaqad, and Bisan Owda during the Israel-Gaza war of 2023-2024 reveals a strategic and nuanced use of social media to navigate and influence public discourse. These influencers utilized their platforms not only to report on events but also to engage in a broader discursive struggle. By employing emotive language, highlighting systemic injustices, and leveraging intertextuality and interdiscursivity, they effectively humanized the conflict and challenged dominant narratives that often dehumanize or marginalize the Palestinian experience.

Central to their discursive practices was the use of personal storytelling, which not only documented the realities on the ground but also actively constructed a collective Palestinian identity. Motaz, Plestia, and Bisan demonstrated a deep understanding of the power of language in shaping perceptions and mobilizing action. Through their posts, they emphasized the resilience and suffering of the Palestinian people, calling for global solidarity and support. This collective narrative served as a counterbalance to mainstream media portrayals, which often overlooked or simplified the complexity of the conflict.

Moreover, the analysis underscores the importance of social media as a tool for activism and advocacy, particularly in conflict zones where traditional media access may be restricted or biased. The influencers' ability to reach a global audience and engage with them in real-time highlights the transformative potential of digital platforms. Their discursive practices not only provided a crucial counter-narrative but also demonstrated the dynamic interplay between online discourse and offline realities, as they advocated for justice and recognition of Palestinian rights.

In conclusion, this study illuminates the complex and multifaceted ways in which Palestinian influencers use digital platforms to engage with and influence public discourse. Their discursive practices challenge hegemonic discourses and offer a richer, more nuanced perspective on the Israel-Gaza conflict. This analysis not only contributes to our understanding



of the role of social media in contemporary conflicts but also highlights the importance of critically engaging with the narratives that shape our perceptions of global events.

5.2 Contributions to the Field

This research contributed to the fields of media and communication, and conflict studies by providing a nuanced understanding of how social media influencers frame narratives and shape discourses around a war. It highlights the importance of digital platforms in contemporary activism, the role of influencers as actors in forming discourses, and the complexities of online censorship.

5.3 Recommendations

Future research should explore the long-term impact of social media activism on public opinion and policy changes. Additionally, practical actions should include advocating for fairer content moderation policies that do not disproportionately affect marginalized voices. Further studies could also investigate the effectiveness of various censorship circumvention strategies and their implications for digital activism. Moreover, the scope of this research was limited to analyzing posts. Including ethnographic work related to Instagram Stories could provide further insights and enhance our understanding of this topic.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

Motaz, Plestia, and Bisan's unique styles are what make them authentic. Their unwavering dedication has helped them gather millions of followers. Even as the war continues and Bisan remains alive in Gaza, they each aim to share their truths and spread their heartfelt message: free Palestine.



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