

Navigating Conflict Coverage on TikTok: Exploring Peace Journalism Practices Among Social Media Influencers

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Abstract

This thesis examined how social media influencers (SMIs) covering international conflicts on TikTok embedded components of peace and violence within their video content. Using a qualitative-dominant method design, the Peace Journalism Model (PJM) was applied as the primary analytical coding framework and complemented with Critical Discourse Analysis for interpretive depth. Audience engagement metrics were also incorporated as a quantitative measure of content visibility and resonance. Findings indicate that SMIs incorporate elements aligned with Peace Journalism, often reflecting a justice-oriented framing that challenges dominant narratives and amplifies marginalised voices. At the same time, these coexist with violence-oriented narratives characterised by polarisation and moral absolutism. The findings are situated within broader debates on violence, identity, and peace-oriented communication through additional theoretical perspectives. The dataset presents ethical considerations and opportunities around influencer-driven communication within a social media environment shaped by algorithms, visibility, and a participatory culture. This study underscores the social and ethical responsibilities of both content creators and consumers. In addition, it offers a modernised application of the PJM to better capture the complexities of social media.

Keywords: TikTok; Social Media Influencers; Peace Journalism; Peace Communication; Media Ecology

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Glossary

The glossary is intended to provide brief definitions of commonly used terms that may require clarification for readers. In particular, it familiarises readers with terminology commonly associated with social media, notably TikTok and its unique affordances.

<p>Audience</p> <p>Individuals who view or engage with content on social media platforms.</p>	<p>Followers</p> <p>Users who subscribe/follow to a content creator's account to receive their content.</p>	<p>Trend / Trending</p> <p>Content, behaviour, or themes that gain rapid popularity on social media and are widely replicated by users.</p>
<p>Content creator</p> <p>An individual who produces and publishes digital content on social media platforms for public consumption. Often used to describe social media influencer.</p>	<p>For You Page (FYP)</p> <p>A personalised content feed on TikTok that recommends videos to users based on their activity and platform signals.</p>	<p>User</p> <p>An individual who accesses, consumes, or interacts with content on a social media platform.</p>
<p>Duet / Duetting</p> <p>A TikTok feature that allows users to create a video alongside an existing video, often to respond, react, or add commentary.</p>	<p>Green screen function</p> <p>The green screen function enables influencers to overlay external visuals, such as news headlines, while discussing them in the foreground.</p>	<p>Verified</p> <p>A platform designation indicating that an account's identity has been confirmed. Often symbolised with a blue check mark.</p>
<p>Fanbase</p> <p>A group of users who regularly follow, support, or engage with a particular content creator.</p>	<p>Influencer</p> <p>Interchangeable term for social media influencer (SMIs) and TikTok influencer.</p>	<p>Viewers</p> <p>Users who watch content on a social media platform.</p>
<p>Feed</p> <p>A stream of content presented to a user on a social media platform. On TikTok, someone's For You Page is considered their feed.</p>	<p>Stitch / Stitching</p> <p>A TikTok feature that allows users to incorporate a short clip from another video into their own content.</p>	<p>Viral video</p> <p>Usually a video that has received a significant online traction. Widely circulated, often "overnight". Not typically something that stays popular for a long period of time.</p>

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introducing the Research Problem and Context

Who or what sources can we trust online when anyone with an Internet connection can share content with a mass audience in matters of seconds? We might trust our family, friends, or even people we admire, but does that automatically justify placing unquestionable trust in the information they share online? Of course, I exclude personal information, such as announcements of a job promotion, pregnancy, retirement, or any other information for which we are the primary source. Instead, I am leaning towards the attribution of trust to the information and news we consume on social media platforms that captures our attention, whether through familiarity, alignment with one's beliefs, values, interests, or the use of effective rhetoric.

The past twenty years have seen a growth in technological development at an exceptional pace. From the invention of the Internet in the early 1980s¹ to ongoing developments with Artificial Intelligence (AI) available to anyone, technology has become part of our everyday life. Therefore, we can only imagine how our dependence on technology has further shaped who we are as individuals, our involvement in society, and our interpretation of the world around us. Amongst these technological advancements is the role of the media. The media has played a significant role in shaping public opinion, cultural norms, and political discourses, influencing the way individuals perceive and engage with societal and, modern, global issues. Moreover, as the media evolves in terms of communication mediums, it has expanded its possibilities of rapid

¹ Specifically, the official date for the invention of the Internet was on January 1st, 1983 (University System of Georgia, n.d.)

information transmission to an international audience. The introduction of social media granted users with Internet access the ability to connect and immediately share content with other users globally. In other words, it has expanded the realm of traditional unidirectional media, such as radio, television, and print media, into bi-directional forms of digital media where the audience can also act as the producers of content (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2020, p.323). What is noteworthy with bi-directional forms of digital media is the problematic, yet opportunistic, possibilities associated with the free range of information flow by and to any user online. This includes individuals taking on the role of citizen journalism². Thus, there are reasonable grounds to assume the higher risk of non-compliance with journalistic codes of ethics like objectivity, transparency, minimizing harm, accuracy, fairness, and integrity (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d.; RTDNA Canada, n.d.; International Federation of Journalists, 2019).

In other words, the professionalisation of journalism was largely reinforced through the adoption of ethical standards designed to protect the field from vulnerabilities recognised by both journalists and the public (Nerone, 2012, p. 201). This process was further supported by the rise of journalism degrees and formal training programs at post-secondary institutions (Nerone, 2012, p. 199). Together, these developments helped shape “the strong ethical and professional ethos of fairness, accuracy and thoroughness” (Hirst, 2011, p. 25) that underpins journalistic integrity and sustains public trust.

In contrast, within today’s social media environment of news circulation and content creation, these expectations do not seamlessly transfer to social media influencers or citizen

² “Citizens [who] take an active role in news work or perform communicative acts that are considered by themselves or others to resemble acts of journalism or to perform a journalistic function” (Thorsen, 2020, p.43).

journalists. Research on platform ethics suggests that social media platforms often prioritise user participation and lack structured ethical guidance, contrasting with established norms in professional journalism (Roberts, 2019).

From a social responsibility perspective, this becomes especially concerning in the context of international conflicts, where the stakes of misinformation and harmful narratives are significantly heightened. The absence of ethical guidelines, particularly those centred on minimising harm, combined with limited training in news reporting, creates the potential for content that reproduces damaging narratives, even when intentions are not malicious.

Therefore, my study's interest is on a particular group of citizen journalists (among other hats that they may wear) who have changed the digital environment of how consumers digest news and interpret social issues. These citizen journalists are considered as social media influencers or, as we will sometimes refer to them as SMIs or 'influencers.' As their title suggests, SMIs have an influential impact on a mass audience due to their attributed credibility, which will be explored in the following chapter. All in all, how news is framed by SMIs warrants a critical examination due to their influential online presence and the potential harm their messaging can inflict on communities. Accordingly, this study draws on Johan Galtung's Peace Journalism principles as both a theoretical and methodological framework to examine how social media influencers frame international conflicts online.

In doing so, this study suggests that SMIs (specifically TikTok influencers) incorporate elements aligned with Peace Journalism. This is evident in their efforts to challenge dominant narratives, promote reflection, surface implicit biases, and amplify marginalised voices, often reflecting a justice-oriented framing. At the same time, these elements coexist with, and are at times interwoven with, components aligned with War Journalism. Notably, violence-oriented

components appear with similar frequency, particularly through polarising and sensationalist framing that is characterised by moral absolutism and binary oppositions. Taken together, these findings invite reflection on both the opportunities and ethical risks of influencer-driven news sharing in the context of international conflict.

To make sense of these coexisting patterns in how conflict is framed, the following section introduces Johan Galtung's Peace Journalism Model, which serves as the primary analytical lens guiding this study.

1.2. Peace Journalism by Johan Galtung

Traditionally, the task of reporting wars and conflicts falls on specialised journalists, commonly referred to as war correspondents. These specialised journalists, duly authorised for their role, are typically required to report first-hand on war and conflict events, and frequently embedded with their respective military units for protection (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). Therefore, Johan Galtung's critic to war correspondents, and to all journalists as a matter of necessity, is in the approach of reporting said events. Arguably, how conflicts are framed in the news will either perpetrate violence or emphasise components of peace (Galtung, 1985; 2006; Galtung & Fischer, 2013; Peleg, 2006). Galtung describes this as journalists adopting aspects either from peace/conflict journalism or war/violence journalism, employing them as distinct dichotomies as illustrated in the Peace Journalism Model (PJM) below.

Table 1*Peace Journalism Model (PJM)*

Originally formulated by Johan Galtung and adapted by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005)

Peace/Conflict Journalism	War/Violence Journalism
I. Peace/conflict-oriented	I. War/violence-oriented
Explore conflict formation, x parties, y goals, z issues, general “win, win” orientation	Focus on conflict arena, 2 parties, 1 goal (win), war, general zero-sum orientation
Open space, open time; causes and outcomes	Closed space, closed time; causes and exits in arena, who threw the first stone
Anywhere, also in history/culture	Making wars opaque/secret
Making conflicts transparent	“Us-them” journalism, propaganda, voice, for “us”
Giving voice to all parties; empathy, understanding	See “them” as the problem, focus on who prevails in war
See conflict/war as problem, focus on conflict creativity	Dehumanisation of “them,”; more so the worse the weapon
Humanisation of all sides; more so the worse the weapons	reactive: waiting for violence before reporting
Proactive: prevention before any violence/war occurs	Focus only on visible effect of violence (killed, wounded and material damage)
Focus on invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture)	
II. Truth-oriented	II. Propaganda-oriented
Expose untruths on all sides / uncover all cover-ups	Expose “their” untruths / help “our” cover-ups/lies
III. People-oriented	III. Elite-oriented
Focus on suffering all over; on women, aged children, giving voice to voiceless	Focus on “our” suffering; on able-bodied elite males, being their mouthpiece
Give name to all evildoers	Give name to their evildoers
Focus on people peacemakers	Focus on elite peacemakers

IV. Solution-oriented	IV. Victory-oriented
Peace = non-violence + creativity	Peace = victory + ceasefire
Highlight peace initiatives, also to prevent more war	Conceal peace-initiative, before victory is at hand
Focus on structure, culture, the peaceful society	Focus on treaty, institution, the controlled society
Aftermath: resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation	Leaving for another war, return if the old flares up again

The PMJ can be described as a tool for journalists to incorporate to news reporting that encourages constructive and non-violent perspectives in covering conflicts. Unlike exclusively dramatic and confrontational conflict coverage, Peace Journalism (PJ) seeks to uncover underlying issues, potential solutions, and the human impact. Its goal is not to determine who wins or loses, but aims to promote understanding, dialogue, and peaceful resolution by providing a more balanced and multi-faceted depiction of the unfolding events. In contrast to traditional conflict news reporting from war correspondents, PJ aspires to bypass perpetrating stereotypes and escalating tensions. It seeks to foster an inclusive and informed space for empathetic public discourse.

Galtung and Fischer further elaborate this contrast by describing traditional, War Journalism (WJ), as taking on the *low road* and Peace Journalism as taking the *high road* in conflict news reporting. He argues that low road reporting is more “dominant in the media” where the conflict at hand is seen as a sports match of two teams (2013, p.96). Furthermore, that “war journalism has sports journalism, and court journalism, as model” (Galtung & Fischer, 2013, p.96), thus emphasising the win-lose outcome. Alternatively, high-road reporting focuses on the aspect of conflict transformation where opportunities reside in the conflict for human progress (Galtung

& Fischer, 2013, p.96). It is no longer a question of an overall winner or loser; it is about contributing to the greater good of a global community. In addition, Galtung wishes to clarify that PJ does not mean the absolute absence of violence in reporting (2013, p.97).

“Focus on nonviolent outcomes, empathy with all parties, creativity: and peace may come.”

Johan Galtung & Dietrich Fischer, 2013 (revised version).

Providing an overview of Johan Galtung’s model of Peace Journalism is a foundational concept for this study. Its purpose is to help establish the context of this research and the significance of my research objectives, which will be outlined in the subsequent section. Nonetheless, while an overview of the PJM sets the stage for this research, the following section will address the desired conceptual lens for the readers to adopt to fully grasp the content and appreciate the intended impact of this study’s findings.

1.3. Walk the Talk: Reader’s Self-Reflection as the Basis of this Study

We all experience the journey of life uniquely, and every aspect of one’s existence shapes how one engages with and interprets the world. From this perspective, reflecting on positionality³ and our intersectionality⁴ offers a framework for understanding how individuals are situated within broader social and relational contexts. For instance, in a society marked by white privilege and

³ A person’s positionality refers to “the power inherent in their immediate respective social positions, [which] greatly influences the differences in what individuals have access to in society” (Misawa, 2010, p.26).

⁴ The concept of intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to which she describes this concept as a “metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and they create obstacles that often are not understood within conventional ways of thinking about anti-racism or feminism or other social advocacy structure [that may exist] (2018, 00:00:10). Furthermore, “it takes into account people’s overlapping [social] identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face” (YN Boston, 2017, para. 6). Refer to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s TED Talk “[The urgency of intersectionality](#)” as an additional resource.

patriarchy, the career trajectories of a black woman and a white man entering the workforce may differ significantly, reflecting unequal opportunities and distinct experiences in professional advancements. Nevertheless, the effect of our positionality and intersectionality takes place from the moment that our story begins to its unforeseeable end and will inevitably shape the person that we are today and who we will become tomorrow. This can and will consciously and unconsciously affect how we perceive and interact with the world.

In short, depending on our positionality (and our awareness of it), our multiplicity of social identities (intersectionality), and our culture, it will undoubtedly inform our biases, thus influencing our behaviours, perceptions, and actions (Stitham, 2022). It is essential for each of us to reflect on our positionality and intersectionality, the ways in which it may have contributed to unconscious biases and created privileges. Moreover, to reflect on how intersectionality might have oppressed us in society.

The purpose and significance of introducing positionality and intersectionality can be explained by referring to the principles of Galtung's Peace Journalism Model and the ambitions stemming from Gerhard Reese's notion of the Common Human Identity (CHI) (2015). Both the PJM and the CHI share a strong similarity: encouraging individuals to see themselves as part of a superordinate social identity, one shaped by being part of a global community. On the one hand, the PJM encourages news reporters to focus on the root of the conflict in the name of building on transformative solutions as a global community rather than focusing on sides, hoping to work towards bettering the situation of humanity. On the other hand, the CHI aims to answer how we can view ourselves as part of a common human identity and how the CHI may improve individual behaviours towards civil rights movements (social, environment, human rights, etc.), contributions to global good, acting against global inequality, and so on (Reese, 2015). Overall, by

acknowledging that we all have unique and different lived experiences, we recognise our shared humanity. Thus, adopting an existential reflective stance provides an analytical foundation for this research. Furthermore, it positions respect for human dignity and integrity as central to understanding conflict-related meaning-making.

1.4. Research Objectives and Thesis Structure

Given the new paradigm of citizen journalism facilitated by the ever-growing world of social media, the opportunities and ethical risks associated with publishing online content to a mass and influenceable audience continues to be a crucial area to explore. The content that is exposed to us online can shape our perceptions, beliefs, and opinions. Consequently shaping how we engage with the world around us. This may contribute to the strengthening of unconscious biases. Although exposure to online content is not always within individual control, critical engagement with such content may shape how it is interpreted and integrated. Nonetheless, whilst the topic of misinformation and dominant narratives will be covered in this paper, the responsibility to critically assess what we consume online also relates to challenging our unconscious biases, which become more ‘conscious’ or, in other words, explicit when we take the time to reflect on our own positionality and intersectionality, as we have mentioned above.

Therefore, one of the research objectives is to situate this study within an understanding of how lived experiences may shape the ways in which information is consumed online. In this sense, reflection serves as a conceptual lens rather than an object of analysis, supporting a more critical engagement with peace communication. Nevertheless, the primary objective of this study is to examine how social media influencers, particularly those who may be labelled as social activists,

integrate Peace Journalism principles when framing international conflicts. The following research questions and hypothesis will guide this inquiry.

Qualitative

Q1: To what extent do TikTok influencers engaging in citizen journalism incorporate Peace Journalism principles when covering on international conflicts?

Q2: What common themes or patterns emerge in TikTok influencers' coverage of international conflicts for both Peace Journalism and War Journalism practices?

Quantitative

Hypothesis: As previously noted, given that influencers have a potential influential impact on a mass audience, it is expected that violence-inciting content during times of crisis may be correlated with more likes, views, shares, saves, and comments than less violence-inciting content.

Furthermore, to examine the phenomenon of social media influencers and its broader communicative counterparts, Chapter 2 will review the existing literature on this topic. The purpose of this chapter is to situate the reader within the evolution of journalism in the social media age, the emergence of new actors, and the shifting ways in which audiences consume news. This study adopts a McLuhanist perspective on the role of media technologies in shaping society; this orientation will be elaborated in the following chapter. In general, the study assumes that social media has become an extension of human communication, wherein influencers carry a particular responsibility for the content they produce. More specifically, the focus narrows to TikTok and the platform's growing role in news consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subsequently, Chapter 3 covers the methodology of this study by outlining the research design and methods employed to explore the central questions and hypothesis. For this purpose, this study incorporated a qualitative-dominant approach with a quantitative component. To do this, TikTok influencers' content will be analysed using the Peace Journalism Model (PJM) as the

analytical framework by focusing on discourse and narratives to synthesise themes and patterns. To complement this, elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be incorporated to further examine influencers' language and framing and strengthen the qualitative interpretation of the narratives. Furthermore, this chapter touches on the ethical considerations that were addressed to ensure the integrity and ethical compliance of the research while also discussing the limitations and their potential impact on the study's findings.

Chapter 4 presents the study's findings and addresses each research question and hypothesis while linking the results back to the Peace Journalism Model. The chapter ends with a synthesis of the key findings. Chapter 5 then offers an interpretative discussion through additional theoretical perspectives, including Johan Galtung's *Cultural Violence*, Pierre Bourdieu's *Symbolic Violence*, Gerhard Reese's *Common Human Identity*, and Courtney Lawton and Brenda Wawa's *Just-Peace Journalism*, to further contextualise and deepen the analysis. This final chapter also outlines implications for content creators, consumers, and scholars, and concludes with recommendations for future research. With this foundation in place, the discussion now unfolds into a fuller examination of the study starting with the literature review.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW – A CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Before proceeding with this chapter, it is essential to acknowledge that each nation has its distinct narratives regarding the evolution of journalism (Simonson et al., 2012, p.20). As well as the rate of digital media convergence in different parts of the world, shaped by their specific socio-economic and political contexts (Jin, 2020). For instance, in North America and Europe, traditional news outlets have rapidly integrated digital platforms like social media for news dissemination. While in other countries like China, state-backed digital platforms like *Weibo* play a significant

role in the shift from traditional to digital journalism (Jin, 2020, p. 24-26, 110-113). Thus, this study centres on North America to provide context-specific insights into the social media era, characterised by new mediums and participants, forever changing the future of the news industry and its potential social impact.

2.1. Journalism in the Social Media Age: New Mediums, New Voices

As previously mentioned, this study's interest lies in observing the social phenomenon of social media influencers (SMIs) and their role in shaping public discourse around social issues. Particularly how they disseminate information concerning international conflicts. This will be done through the lens of media ecology. As Neil Postman highlights, "media ecology looks into how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival" (1970, p. 161). In an era where social media platforms increasingly mediate our access to information, understanding how these evolving media environments interplay with contemporary forms of influence and news consumption becomes essential. To situate this study within that wider context, the chapter outlines foundational concepts, such as citizen journalism, modern opinion leaders, *the medium is the message* (Marshal McLuhan) and perceived credibility, to clarify the interconnected elements shaping the phenomenon under exploration and to identify gaps in existing research. Another way to approach this chapter is to read it as a chronological progression, with each section building upon the previous one. To lay the foundation, the chapter begins by examining the shift from traditional to modern, more participatory journalism culture.

2.1.1. The Shift in Traditional Journalism: Commercialisation, Trust, and New Media

The commercialisation of news and its political instrumentalization were two key forces factors that shaped traditional, institutionalised journalism and contributed significantly to its decline in public trust (Hirst, 2011). These dynamics raised concerns about the “commercial structure of the news industry, [like the creation of fake news for commercial purposes]”, and the “exposure of government news management used to mislead the public for base political reasons” (Hirst, 2011, p.40). The rise and evolution of social media further compounded these issues⁵. In *News 2.0*, Martin Hirst examines the convergence between social media and journalism, offering a balanced analysis that considers both the challenges and opportunities. He argues that “the technological, economic, social and cultural forces that shape our society, and the direction in which it is moving, all impact on each other. Any one of these factors can act as an accelerant or a brake on development at any particular point in time” (2011, p.14). Furthermore, while Hirst acknowledges that the profitability of news (2011, p.11), the rise of “alternative sources of news and news-like information”, and the rapid expansion of global mass communication (2011, p. 12) raise valid concerns about the future of professional journalism, he remains cautiously optimistic that the evolving media environment provides room for innovation to keep the profession relevant and needed (2011, p. 10-11). One such development is the integration of “citizen-produced content [alongside] professional content” (Chung et al., 2018, p.1698). This shift has accelerated the growth of citizen journalism as an alternative news source. Empowered by social media and its growing influence as a counterbalance to traditional journalism.

⁵ Martin Hirst’s book “*News 2.0: Can journalism survive the Internet?*” writes extensively about the future of journalism during the social media era.

2.1.2. An Introduction to Citizen Journalism

As seen above, citizen journalism emerges in response to gaps produced by social media and declining trust in traditional journalism, and it further challenges mainstream gatekeeping by opening space for diverse voices and real-time accounts. By amplifying diverse voices, citizen journalism challenges mainstream media norms and highlights the shifting nature of news in the social media age. In a different light, some define citizen journalists as “people who are not trained in news gathering and writing and who are often 'ignorant' of the culture of professional journalism” (Hirst, 2011, p.23). However, this perspective often overlooks citizen journalism’s multidimensional and multifaceted nature, encompassing more than just a lack of formal training (Chung et al., 2018). For this study, the broader conceptualisation of citizen journalism proposed by Chung et al. (2018) will serve as the guiding definition:

[Citizen journalism] refers to a multifaceted, multidimensional, and multilevel concept that ties to professional foundations (e.g. knowledge, skills, ethics), practices (e.g. social media), and roles in the journalistic field and society at large (e.g. community engagement). This variable, thus, discusses citizen journalism within the occupational, behavioural/practical, and normative parameters.

(p. 1697)

Hirst’s observation that citizen journalists often lack formal training mirrors a frequent concern raised by traditional journalists. In a study conducted by Lewis et al. (2010), “they found general disapproval of citizen journalism activities based on theoretical grounds (e.g. training in the understanding of traditional journalism values and ethics, such as anonymous sources) and practical concerns (e.g. content issues, such as biased content)” (Chung et al. 2018, p.1698). However, it is important to recognize that some research on citizen journalism is shaped by concerns about maintaining professional norms and job security within traditional journalism. Therefore, research on citizen journalists should account for how they navigate the media

environment while remaining mindful of researcher bias. From a media ecological perspective, their role is not judged as inherently good or bad but understood in terms of how their participation shapes evolving news dynamics.

Building on this perspective, it becomes essential to examine the medium through which much of this citizen-driven engagement occurs, that of social media. Social media has emerged as a dominant space where news is produced, circulated, and contested by both traditional outlets and individual users alike. Understanding its affordances and dynamics is thus critical to grasping how the role of citizen journalists continues to grow in the realm of social media.

2.2. Social Media: Redefining the Public Sphere

Social media platforms have evolved beyond mere networking sites; they now serve as digital arenas where public discourse unfolds, political movements take shape, and news is shared. This section explores how social media has woven itself into everyday life and come to function as an extension of who we are.

2.2.1. The Transition to Web 2.0: Building a Participatory Culture

Web 1.0 mirrors the same concept as traditional news (unidirectional flow in the dissemination of information), where users act as passive consumers of online content. Web 2.0, on the other hand, revolutionised how people interact with the Internet (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2020). It became a social space, where engagement, sharing, and communication were central to the online experience (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2020). Today, the media environment, characterised by the innovations of Web 2.0, has flourished like wild, garden, vibrant opportunities, and invasive challenges have spread rapidly. A garden whose roots now intertwine with our own.

2.2.2. Social Media as an Extension of Ourselves

As social media platforms continue to shape the media environment, it has evolved beyond a communication tool by also becoming an extension of ourselves. It has transformed how we connect, create, and perceive the world around us. It might seem at first that describing social media as an extension of us evokes ideas from science-fiction, where humans are seamlessly integrated with technology, blurring the boundaries between the digital and physical worlds. However, this portrayal might not be too far from reality. For instance, by taking a moment to reflect our on social media usage⁶, we can try to dissect the role of social media in terms of shaping our identities, relationships, perceptions, behaviours, and so on. Therefore, by taking a moment to reflect on the following questions, we can see how social media usage has potentially shaped us:

Do you feel your online presence reflects your true self, or does the medium influence how you present yourself to others?

Do you feel a particular way after a prolonged time on social media platforms?

In what ways do you think that social media has altered your perception of reality, relationships, and the world around you?

Are you consciously aware of how social media platforms shape the types of content you engage with or the opinions you form?

How does social media extend or limit your ability to connect with others compared to face-to-face communication?

Has social media encouraged or limited your ability to deepen your understanding of information (given the high traffic of information flow), or does it tend to reduce complex ideas to superficial interactions?

⁶ This can range from social media use on different platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, LinkedIn, and X (formerly Twitter). In addition, social media usage is not restricted to being an active user (e.g. liking, commenting, posting content regularly or periodically) on said social media platform but also includes being a passive user (e.g. scrolling passively on your feed, but not necessarily engaging, viewing what others have posted).

The idea behind viewing media as an extension of ourselves was coined by Marshall McLuhan with his famous concept of ‘*The Medium is the Message*’. In his book, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (McLuhan & Gordon, 2003), McLuhan expanded on this idea. He argues that the characteristics or affordances of a medium, not just the content it delivers, profoundly influence how we perceive and interact with the world. For example, McLuhan explains that the lights on a football field do not have content themselves – they illuminate the field. However, their presence enables the game to be played at night, fundamentally changing how and when people experience football. Thus, the lights alter social behaviour, extend the usability of the space, and create new opportunities for participation and engagement with the sport. In this example, McLuhan suggests that the medium (electric lights) is the message, not what happens on the field. The lights extend human activity into the night and transform our perception with time and social interaction. The content (football game) is secondary to the transformative power of the medium (the lights). In other words, by focusing solely on the ‘content’ of a medium, we overlook the profound and often unnoticed effects media has on individuals and societies (McLuhan & Gordon, 2003).

While Marshall McLuhan passed away in 1980, those familiar with his work often speculate on what he would have thought of the Internet and social media. Especially given that he had already seen television, radio, and newspapers as catalysts for transforming the world into a ‘global village’ (Watson & Hill, 2015, p.174; Jan et al., 2020). Some think that McLuhan might suggest that social media amplifies interconnectedness within the ‘global village,’ further blurring the line between private and public spaces on a global scale (Jan et al., 2020; Lüders et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, this study suggests that social media, as the host for ‘the message,’ plays a pivotal role in shaping how we interact, think, and engage with the world, with our usage patterns

influencing these effects⁷. For instance, individuals are composing online identities shaped not only by traditional influences such as school peers, neighbours, friends, and family, but increasingly by the vast and diverse online networks, algorithms (Lüders et al., 2022), and global trends. In general, this process has profound implications. It can blur the line between authentic self-expression and curated online personas⁸, while creating opportunities for empowerment alongside heightened risks of misinformation, manipulation, and privacy erosion.

Nonetheless, the focus of this study, social media influencers (SMIs), discussed in the following section, represents a modern form of influence that embodies the duality of ‘the medium is the message’. This duality reflects not only their ability to shape narratives and opinions but also their susceptibility to the content and dynamics of social media platforms. These forces, in turn, influence their own perspectives and actions. Thus, SMIs are both creators and products of the social media ecosystem – a perspective that distinguishes this study from others.

In general, understanding how social media functions as an extension of ourselves, shaping our identities, relationships, perceptions, behaviours, and public discourse, is crucial to understanding this study. Particularly around the dissemination of information. McLuhan’s

⁷ Questions above demonstrate how social media can shape us and its potential effects.

⁸ Research examining the variables that contribute to users' online social identity often distinguishes between unconscious influences, such as benign envy, social comparison, negative gossip, and self-esteem (Latif et al., 2020; Bergagna & Tartaglia, 2018; Cramer et al., 2016), typically observed among adolescents, and more conscious strategies of identity construction (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017; Lüders et al. 2022). Often, social media influencers fall into the latter category to maintain their status.

perspective highlights the process, rather than solely focusing on the content, of how information is both consciously and unconsciously⁹ consumed and applied within society.

Furthermore, while some research have explored McLuhan's concept of the 'medium is the message' in relation to social media¹⁰, and others perhaps more implicitly, there remains a significant gap in fully understanding its application. This gap becomes even more pronounced when considering social media influencers. Consequently, this study aims to contribute to this discussion by examining how narratives around international conflict are formed and circulated through social media influencers within the algorithmically driven environment of TikTok. While this research does not measure the direct effects or impact of such narratives on audiences, it seeks to raise awareness of the processes through which news-related content is shared and framed by influencers. In doing so, the study invites readers to critically reflect on their own consumption and potential reproduction of these narratives within the social media environment.

These dynamics also connect to broader debates on media power, where social media can be understood as simultaneously shaping audiences, interacting with traditional media systems, and functioning as an alternative space for participation and meaning-making. The following subsection situates this study within these broader debates on social media's role in shaping and influencing audiences.

⁹ By mentioning that information can be both consciously and unconsciously consumed and applied is to acknowledge the role of media effects research plays in understanding how media influences cognitive processing, emotional responses, and behavioural change (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2020).

¹⁰ Such as 'Marshall McLuhan's Technological Determinism Theory in the Arena of Social Media' (Jan et al., 2020) and 'A Lexicon for Social Media: A Review of General Semantics' (Gross, 2016).

2.2.3. Perspectives on Media Power in the Social Media Age

When situating this study within broader debates on media influence, three dominant perspectives on the power of social media are generally identified. The first reflects an “all-powerful media” perspective, drawing on McLuhan’s notion that the medium itself shapes how individuals perceive and engage with the world. From this view, platform affordances and algorithmic structures play a significant role in shaping audience understanding. The second perspective considers “relative media power,” in which social media operates in relation to established media systems. In this view, social media content may be amplified by, or interact with, traditional media actors, contributing to its broader reach and legitimacy.¹¹ Finally, the third perspective positions social media as an alternative media space in which citizen journalists and influencers challenge traditional gatekeeping structures and create new avenues for participation and meaning-making.

Rather than situating this study within a single perspective, it suggests that these three dynamics coexist within the social media environment, particularly in the context of TikTok¹² as a platform for information dissemination shaped by distinct affordances. First, both content creators and consumers participate within a media environment that is influenced by the platform itself. For instance, algorithms contribute to what is made visible (and what remains less visible), formats shape how content is presented (e.g., short videos and trends), and engagement features

¹¹ This perspective is further illustrated through the Two-Step Flow of Communication model, introduced in Section 2.3.1 on social media influencers as opinion leaders in the social media age.

¹² TikTok serves as the primary platform examined in this study; the rationale for its selection is outlined later in this chapter.

enable multiple forms of interaction (e.g., commenting, sharing, saving). Thus, social media, and TikTok specifically, illustrates how platform structures actively shape the production, circulation, and interpretation of content.

Second, within TikTok's affordances, content creators participate in a broader media ecosystem. Just as professional journalists may integrate citizen-generated content into their reporting, TikTok users can similarly incorporate content from news outlets into their own videos. Consequently, this relationship becomes bidirectional, as both traditional media and social media actors draw from, reinterpret, and reframe each other's content in the dissemination of information.

Finally, while content creators may draw on traditional media to inform their content, they may also use their platforms to challenge established gatekeepers by reframing narratives, amplifying alternative perspectives, and asserting their own interpretive authority.

Taken together, this study adopts a nuanced position that recognises social media influence as neither singular nor fixed, but as an interplay of overlapping dynamics shaped by platform structures, media interactions, and participatory practices. With this in mind, we now turn to explore the role and presence of the observed content creators: social media influencers.

2.3. With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: The Rise of Social Media Influencers

Uncle Ben once told Peter Parker (Spider-Man from the Marvel comics) that 'with great power comes great responsibility', but was he ready for it? One day he was a typical teenage boy attending high school, then became a teenager with a new set of 'superpowers' overnight. Similarly, social media influencers (SMIs) sometimes find themselves thrust into a position with great influence, at times at a blink of an eye. They might start as ordinary individuals sharing

content online, but as their follower count grows, so does their potential impact (Kim & Hye-Young, 2023). Like Spider-Man, they must navigate the responsibilities that come with their newfound influence – recognising that their words, actions, and endorsements can shape opinions, affect lives, and even drive social change (Harff & Schmuck, 2023). This highlights the importance of social responsibility, the ethical consideration of how SMIs' content can impact society and their audience. Over the years, the phenomenon of social media influencers, or otherwise commonly referred to as 'influencers', has captured the attention of many researchers. Some of which have explored their social influence in contexts ranging from business and brand promotion to opinion leadership (Ouvrein et al., 2021). Thus, this highlights their dual role in influencing consumer behaviour and public discourse – the latter being the category where this study falls. At this stage, this thesis does not assign social media influencers fixed categorial or professional roles. Rather, subsequent sections examine how some SMIs may, in specific contexts, take on practices associated with citizen journalism when framing conflict narratives or asserting informational authority. This distinction is important, as not all SMIs operate in this capacity, which makes the selection criteria outlined in Chapter 3 central to the study's analytical focus.

That said, the following paragraphs review existing literature on SMIs to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon within the realm of them becoming modern opinion leaders and to identify potential gaps that this study seeks to address.

2.3.1. Social Media Influencers: Opinion Leaders of the Social Media Age

The *Two-Step Flow Theory* is often applied to conceptualise a social media influencer's use of influence (Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021). The *Two-Step Flow Theory* is a communication model rooted in the findings of *The People's Choice* research project by Paul F. Lazardfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, which focused on exploring how

media influenced voter behaviour during the 1940 U.S. presidential election. The core concept of the communication model suggests that the media does not directly influence the masses, but, instead, flows through a two-step process (Katz, 1957). In short, media inform opinion leaders, who in turn inform others. (Katz, 1957). As described by Katz (1957), opinion leaders are people who share, interpret, and influence the wider public's view within social circles. In this context, SMIs can be understood as the opinion leaders. Notwithstanding, how SMIs choose to engage with external media content (such as news), whether to mediate, counter, or expand upon it, suggests that their role as opinion leaders is not limited to transmitting information, but may also involve actively shaping how that information is interpreted.

2.3.2. Trust Me, I am an Influencer: How Audiences Perceive Credibility

While the Two-Step Flow model helps explain how opinion leaders mediate information to audiences, it does not fully capture the complexity of social media influencers. Unlike traditional opinion leaders (often professional journalists), SMIs establish credibility through a combination of factors, including follower count, parasocial relationships, authenticity, expertise (e.g. beauty, fashion, history, politics, etc.), and homophily. These elements shape an SMI's perceived credibility (Serman and Sims, 2023). The following paragraphs briefly explore each of these factors to better understand how they may contribute to the construction of perceived credibility. It is important to note that research on social media influencers and credibility attribution remains ongoing. The factors discussed below represent possible explanatory dimensions rather than definitive or exhaustive criteria, and they do not necessarily operate in combination or apply uniformly across contexts.

Follower Count

A study by Conde and Casais (2023) found that attributes such as authenticity, popularity and trustworthiness are not uniformly distributed but vary depending on a SMI's follower count (see Table 2.1). As Table 2.1 demonstrates, SMIs with a mega-size follower count are often portrayed as celebrities, and their influence spans from social media to mainstream culture media (Conde & Casais, 2023). Raja et al. (2024) noted that influencers with a massive fanbase, often categorised as mega influencers, are typically perceived as more credible due to their scale and visibility. However, their interactions with followers tend to be less personal, with credibility relying more on status and widespread recognition than direct engagement.

Table 2.1

Micro, Macro and Mega Influencers Follower Count Potential Effect

Table created by Conde & Casais's article (2023)

Type of influencer	Micro	Macro	Mega
Followers	1,000 and 100,000	100,000 and 1 million	Over 1 million
Characteristics	They often have a strong voice within a specific niche (e.g., beauty, fitness, travel), creating closer, more personal relationships with their audience.	They have a more diverse audience and broader reach than micro-influencers. They are often perceived as opinion leaders in their fields but maintain less intimacy with their followers.	They are like celebrities, widely recognised, and have the highest reach. Their influence spans across broader audiences and often extends beyond social media.
Advantages	They are seen as more authentic, trustworthy, and accessible, leading to higher engagement rates and stronger	They offer a balance of reach and engagement, making them suitable for brands targeting	They create global trends, offer high visibility, and provide significant reach, making them ideal for

	parasocial relationships.	specific but sizable markets.	mass marketing campaigns.
Disadvantages	They have lower reach and visibility compared to larger influencers.	Engagement rates are lower than those of micro-influencers, and they may be less relatable to individual followers.	Engagement rates can be lower, and their influence is often perceived as less personal and more commercial, leading to weaker parasocial relationships.

Parasocial Relationships

In contrast, micro and macro influencers engage more directly with their followers, fostering stronger trust and parasocial relationships. Because they maintain a closer, more intimate – whether real or perceived, a phenomenon known as 'pseudo-intimacy' (Harff, 2022) – presence in their niche communities, they are often seen as more relatable and authentic (Conde & Casais, 2023). Their ability to interact with followers on a personal level contributes significantly to building trust and perceived credibility. Strong parasocial relationships between a social media influencer and their followers create a personal connection, encouraging followers to adopt SMIs' recommendations (Conde & Casais, 2023; Raja et al., 2024), thereby reinforcing SMIs' role as opinion leaders.

Authenticity

While parasocial relationships establish emotional connections and trust, perceived authenticity further shapes an influencer's credibility. Audiences engage with influencers they feel close to and assess whether they appear genuine and transparent in their content. However, as SMIs grow in popularity, their perceived authenticity can decline, with more prominent influencers

often seen as more commercially driven (Conde & Casais, 2023). While some scholars argue that influencer authenticity is strategically constructed (Baker, 2022), audiences increasingly expect influencers to balance personal expression with transparency (Hund, 2023). In short, this reflects a tension between expressing authenticity and being perceived as authentic. When perceived as genuine, authenticity can strongly shape audience trust and influence.

Expertise

Beyond perceived authenticity, an influencer's credibility is also shaped by their expertise or specialisation in a particular niche (Serman & Sims, 2023). Research shows audiences are likelier to trust influencers who align with their specific areas of interest, particularly in domains like politics, science, or health. For example, Harff (2022) found that political advice is more likely to be accepted from a political influencer than a general lifestyle SMI¹³. This suggests that personal trust in an influencer and their perceived authority in a subject area play a crucial role in shaping audience engagement with recommendations.

Homophily

Finally, social capital, the networks and shared norms that foster trust and reciprocity within a community, emerges as another key factor in shaping perceived credibility (Alperstein, 2021). A crucial aspect of social capital is homophily, also known as source similarity (Harff, 2022). Homophily is the tendency of individuals to associate with and trust those who share similar characteristics, beliefs, interests, or values (Harff, 2022; Kim & Hye-Young, 2023). Within media

¹³ A lifestyle social media influencer curates and shares content that reflects their personal habits, interests, and daily routines, often spanning areas like wellness, fashion, travel, home decor, and relationships. Their posts are designed to offer a glimpse into their way of living, creating aspirational narratives.

networks, homophily means that people are more likely to connect and engage within networks where they find shared similarities (Alperstein, 2021). This can translate to individuals engaging with SMIs who reflect their identities and perspectives. For instance, Harff's (2022) study on political social media influencers suggests that political information is more persuasive when there is substantial value alignment between SMI and their followers. Thus, making it more likely for audiences to relate to and trust the content. Homophily fosters trust and strengthens community bonds, encapsulated in the phrase 'birds of a feather flock together' (Alperstein, 2021). However, while homophily and social capital enhance trust, they also contribute to the echo chamber effect, particularly on algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok. This raises concerns about "the role of influencers in further fostering selective exposure" (Harff, 2022, p.113), where followers may primarily engage with SMIs who reinforce their existing beliefs, potentially limiting diverse perspectives and deepening ideological divides.

Together, follower count, parasocial relationships, authenticity, expertise, and homophily illustrate key factors through which influencers can establish perceived credibility and gain influence. These factors can help conceptualise an SMI's influence and shape how audiences engage with and internalise information. Next, we consider the shifts in SMI research over the recent years.

2.3.3. Bridging the Gap: From SMI Research to Global Conflict Narratives

Social media influencers have increasingly become a significant subject of study, with scholarly attention shifting over time. Early research primarily examined their influence through marketing and human-branding frameworks, whereas more recent work explores their potential role in shaping public discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 appears to mark a pivotal moment, prompting renewed scholarly attention to SMIs' influence on both individuals and society

at large. A recurring theme across several studies, one that can be hypothetically applied to this research, is the observed correlation between growing public distrust in institutional or mainstream authorities and the tendency to seek information from unofficial sources on social media (Schmuck & Harff, 2023; Hirst, 2011), which includes social media influencers.

In this context, social media often functions as an alternative news sources, filling informational gap created by declining of trust in traditional news institutions (Hirst, 2011). Many individuals who feel distanced from institutional media turn to influencers, perceiving them as offering more relatable, alternative, and sometimes more credible perspectives. At the same time, research highlights concerns about the spread of misinformation and the oversimplification of complex issues by influencers (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Peter & Muth, 2023). Particularly when personal opinions are presented as facts (Chee et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, influencers without formal expertise circulated misleading claims, such as the ineffectiveness of face masks or the notion that a healthy lifestyle could entirely prevent infection (Harff, Bollen & Schmuck, 2022). When presented by trusted SMIs, such claims can shape public risk perception and deepen scepticism toward official institutions and information (Harff, Bollen & Schmuck, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023). However, as explored further in Section 2.4.3., this shift is double-edged. Influencers may provide accessible interpretations, yet they also operate within algorithmic systems that reinforce selective exposure, amplify emotionally charged content, and contribute to echo chambers.

Beyond healthcare and lifestyle contexts, scholars have increasingly examined how SMIs operate within broader political and global communication environments, at times functioning as conduits of digital propaganda. Manfredi et al. (2024) argue that influencers now play a visible role in shaping diplomatic discourse and political narratives. In conflict settings or in debates over

contentious issues such as war or migration, they may amplify underrepresented perspectives while also contributing to the circulation of misinformation. Likewise, Woolley (2022) and Demuyakor (2021) link the rise of SMIs to evolving propaganda strategies, highlighting how influencers are embedded within a digital ecosystem optimized for emotional engagement, sensationalism, and, at times, strategic disinformation. These developments echo core elements of Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, wherein media content is shaped by ownership, advertising pressures, sourcing biases, and ideological forces, filters that now operate across decentralized digital networks.

While this study does not measure propaganda strategies directly, it recognises their relevance when examining how influencers frame international conflicts and gain legitimacy among audiences increasingly sceptical of traditional institutions. As digital voices blend the roles of activist, entertainer, and citizen journalist, they operate in a hybrid media system where state actors, influencers, and algorithms all compete to shape public understanding of global events.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, peer-reviewed research on how social media shapes public discourse during international conflicts has expanded significantly. This study contributes to that field by applying the Peace Journalism Model to influencer-driven content, examining how social media influencers embed peace-oriented elements within their narratives while considering the broader societal implications of these narratives through additional theoretical lenses.

By situating influencer activity within the global and conflict-related dimensions of digital communication, this study offers insight into how SMIs shape public narratives within an increasingly participatory and algorithmically driven information environment. In doing so, it extends existing research to the intersection of citizen journalism, social issues, peace

communication, and evolving structures of public discourse. To further explore these dynamics, the following section turns to an examination of TikTok, the platform at the centre of this study.

2.4. From Viral Trends to News Cycles: The Rise of TikTok as an Information Hub

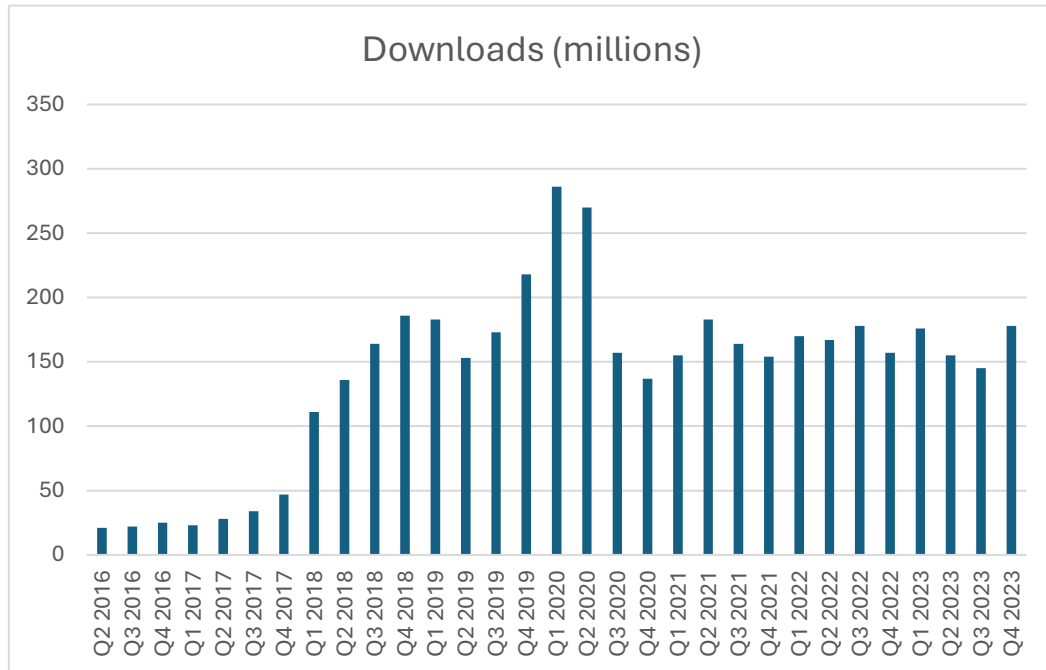
2.4.1. Context

TikTok is a social media platform that originated in China and was launched by the tech company ByteDance in September 2016 under the name *Douyin*. It was rebranded as TikTok for the international market in September 2017. The app boasts a unique user interface driven by algorithm, creating a personalised and engaging experience for each user. TikTok experienced exponential growth in user engagement following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (GlobalWebIndex, 2020, p.20), with significant increases in its penetration rate, primarily among 18-24-year-olds. According to *Made in CA* (2024), the penetration rate in Canada surged by 200% from 2019 to 2020, reflecting a substantial uptake among the population. Similarly, in the United States, the penetration rate measured in 2020 reached 180%, underscoring the widespread adoption and popularity of the platform during that period (Statista, 2022). Another way to conceptualise TikTok's rapid growth during the COVID-19 pandemic is by examining its download numbers (see Table 2.2 below).

Table 2.2

TikTok Quarterly Downloads 2017 to 2023 (mm)

Table source: Business of Apps (2024)



Studies indicate that TikTok’s surge during COVID-19 reflected wider increases in social media use under lockdowns (Feldkamp, 2021; GlobalWebIndex, 2020). TikTok leveraged this engagement by diversifying its platform and enhancing its competitive footing, leading to rapid adoption and sustained growth throughout quarantine (Feldkamp, 2021).

However, the growing popularity of TikTok is not this study’s sole rationale for selecting it as my subject for analysis. The second and most crucial reason relies on the growing news culture on TikTok. The following tables (Table 2.3 and Table 2.4) illustrate the rapid growth of TikTok as a news source, with Generation Z being the highest population engaging with the platform (Statista, 2024a; Pew Research Center, 2023; Statista, 2024b). While the percentages shown in the tables are low in comparison, its steep incline and growing influence are sufficient to warrant closer scrutiny.

Table 2.3

Social Media Sites by Portion of Users who Regularly Get News There (respondents based in the United States)

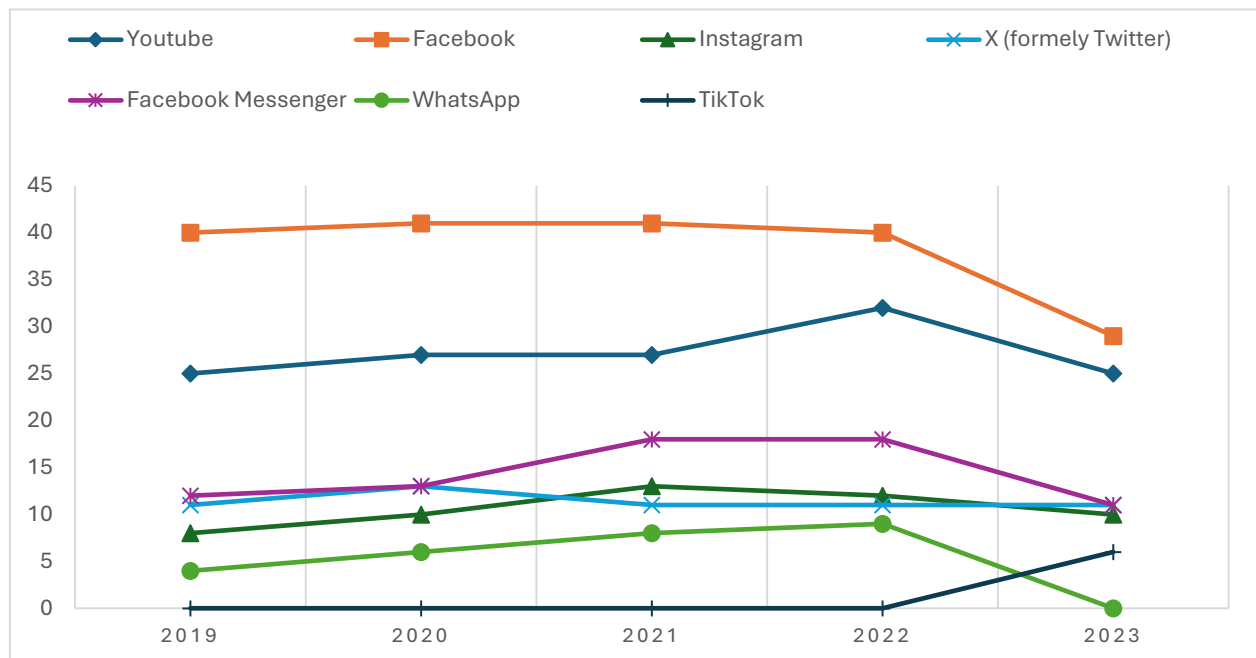
Table source: Adapted from data by Pew Research Center (2023), *Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 25–Oct. 1, 2023*.

Platform	2020 (%)	2023 (%)
X (Twitter)	59	53
Facebook	54	43
Reddit	42	38
YouTube	32	32
Instagram	28	34
TikTok	22	43
Snapchat	19	15
LinkedIn	15	17
WhatsApp	13	12
Twitch	11	17
Nextdoor	23	28

Table 2.4

Leading Social Networks Used Weekly for News in Canada from 2019 to 2023

Table source: Adapted from data by Statista (2023)



Furthermore, Generation Z's growing influence on popular culture and journalism (Dimock, 2019) underscores the importance of examining TikTok within this study. As the platform's primary user base, Gen Z represents a critical demographic for understanding how younger audiences engage with and disseminate information about international events. Indeed, they are increasingly viewed as "the consumers who are to decide the fate of social media in the coming years" (Statista, 2024c, para. 5). TikTok's capacity to circulate information rapidly through influencers further positions it as a powerful site for real-time updates and grassroots reporting on global issues.

As Generation Z continues to shape popular culture, they are increasingly capable of influencing public opinion, making it essential to understand TikTok's role in this dynamic. However, with ongoing discussions about its potential ban in the United States¹⁴, questions arise about the platform's longevity. Still, the findings of this study remain relevant, as the phenomenon examined, how social media influencers shapes perceptions and discourse, is not confined to TikTok. The core issue is not the platform itself but where the media attention and influence are concentrated. Nevertheless, for now, TikTok's relative novelty warrants closer scrutiny due to its rapid integration into North American societies.

In summary, given the platform's extensive reach and the global circulation of its content, analysing TikTok influencers' news coverage, particularly on international conflicts, becomes especially relevant for the following reasons. First, TikTok's penetration rate in North America surged during the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued to gain popularity globally over the

¹⁴ A brief suspension occurred in the United States on January 18, 2025, lasting one day before being reversed by an executive order from President Trump.

years. Second, the platform has rapidly grown as a news source for many users, particularly among Generation Z. Third, the popularity and active engagement of Generation Z users on TikTok suggest that we should closely examine the platform's potential effects of social media influencers engaging in journalistic practices. Collectively, these reasons position TikTok as a robust platform for this study, offering meaningful data on how TikTok influencers communicate global events. Next, we look more specifically into how TikTok partly became an entry point for news.

2.4.2. TikTok as an Entry Point for News

TikTok has emerged as a key news source; however, unlike traditional media, it delivers content through algorithmic curation. Instead of users actively seeking news, TikTok's algorithm presents content based on platform behaviours such as likes, shares, watch time, and interactions. Therefore, news content can present itself to a user's feed without actively seeking it, but rather by casually engaging with content on their feed (Peter & Muth, 2023; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021). In other words, TikTok's unique platform facilitates incidental rather than intentional news consumption, as is typical for traditional media. Consequently, the incidental exposure to news on TikTok is a valuable entry point into news. Furthermore, TikTok's format encourages the presentation of news in an engaging, often emotional or humorous manner, which can appeal to users' desire for entertainment (Hautea et al., 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021). Ultimately, this may have implications on how the TikTok users, notably Generation Z, interpret and value information, emphasizing emotional appeal and relatability. Thus, blurring the lines between news and entertainment and potentially impacting critical media literacy in younger generations (Barta et al., 2023). This shift in how younger audiences consume news carries significant implications for how information circulates. This is particularly relevant on TikTok, where an algorithm-driven

environment can reinforce selective exposure, amplify emotionally charged content, and contribute to echo chambers.

2.4.3. Echo Chambers and Hashtag Revolutions: The Double-Edge Sword of TikTok

By curating content based on user interactions, TikTok’s algorithm system personalizes feeds for its individual users. This algorithmic design can create echo chambers in which users primarily engage with content that aligns with their pre-existing values and worldviews (Fong et al., 2024; Khalid et al., 2018). Such environments deepen confirmation bias and limit exposure to diverse perspectives, potentially confining users to what Adichie (TEDtalk, 2009) refers to as the “danger of a single story”. For example, by engaging with a video (like, share, save, or comment), TikTok will populate the person’s feed with similar content. In popular culture, individuals adopted the language of which ‘side’ of TikTok someone is on (e.g. BookTok¹⁵, videos of a viral trend, cats, etc.). Moreover, this can also apply to news-related content.

That said, TikTok can also be a space for digital activism. As highlighted by Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023), Hautea et al. (2021), and Harff and Schmuck (2023), the platform facilitates social and political mobilisation through trends, challenges, and hashtags, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared purpose among users. Influencers, acting as opinion leaders, often drive these movements by encouraging audiences to participate in advocacy (Harff & Schmuck, 2023). While this form of activism tends to be more symbolic than policy-oriented, it

¹⁵ If possible, some might add a singular noun in front of ‘Tok’ as a response to which side of TikTok they are on.

nonetheless raises awareness and mobilises users around social issues (Hautea et al., 2021; Harff & Schmuck, 2023).

Overall, TikTok is a diverse platform where content is not confined to a single genre. With its rapid growth, highly personalized algorithm, and the risks of selective exposure, TikTok (as with any other social media platform) becomes a point of entry for exploring how content is disseminated and consumed. The next section examines how responsibility is distributed in this new age of social media. One that calls greater awareness of our roles as both active content creators and reflective consumers.

2.5. The Responsibility of Influence in the Social Media Age

As McLuhan expressed in his book, “the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan & Gordon, 2003, p. 8), meaning that social media has become an extension of ourselves along with its social platforms, like TikTok. With this logic in mind, how we use these platforms carries a weight of social responsibility, influencing our own behaviours and shaping societal norms, conversations, and the spread of information. A notable example of this dynamic occurred in 2022, when the White House briefed TikTok influencers on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, recognising their influence in shaping public opinion among younger audiences (Rosenberg, 2022; Brito, 2022) In a private Zoom call, government officials, including White House secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Council staff, provided social media influencers with information to counter misinformation and frame the conflict accurately from the White House’s perspective. This moment underscores how SMIs have emerged as alternative news sources, often blurring the lines between journalism and content creation.

Nevertheless, as Nelson Mandela once said, ‘the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow’, thus emphasising the role of youth in taking personal and social responsibility for social media usage during the early stages of its era. Whether you are part of Generation Z or another generation, the key takeaway for all social media users is to engage with these platforms thoughtfully, applying critical yet constructive scrutiny to harness their potential while responsibly addressing their challenges. This is something to which I hope this study can meaningfully contribute.

2.6. Contributions and Research Gaps

Many studies focusing on the role of social media influencers in shaping public discourse often overlook the potential social consequences of how they frame and reshape narratives when informing the public about an event. This study takes a unique approach by examining how these narratives are constructed and whether they perpetuate violence or incorporate components of peace, using the Peace Journalism Model as the primary analytical framework. To further enrich these study’s findings, diverse theoretical interpretations will be applied to the dataset to explore the opportunities and risks. Including Johan Galtung’s *Cultural Violence*, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Symbolic Violence*, Gerhard Reese’s *Common Human Identity*, and Courtney Lawton and Brenda Wawa’s *Just-Peace Journalism*, to further contextualize and deepen the analysis. Something unique to this study.

Furthermore, this study provides an alternative perspective on the role of social media influencers when creating content for a wider audience. Rather than categorising them solely as human brands, marketing strategies, celebrities, political commentators, and so forth, this research examines SMIs, meeting specific selection criteria, as citizen journalists covering international

conflicts. It contributes to media studies, peace communication, and social sciences by offering a nuanced understanding of SMI's role in shaping social dynamics and potentially influencing public perception by exploring framing practices of global events through a PJM-lens.

Beyond critically assessing citizen journalism practices among influential figures, this study also aims to raise awareness about how we consume news online, encouraging the development of critical media literacy. This issue is especially relevant for younger generations who are primarily online (Barta et al., 2023). Ultimately, the findings of this research will provide a foundation for future interdisciplinary studies bridging social media and conflict studies, deepening our understanding of the intersection between digital influence, information dissemination, and societal impact.

The following chapter outlines the methodological design of this study. It re-introduces the research questions, presents the case study, and describes the processes of data collection and analysis. It also introduces the coding framework that guided the interpretation of the material.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction and Research Questions

This research employed an overarching framework to examine how TikTok influencers framed international conflicts. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict from October 7th, 2023, to November 7th, 2023, was focused as the case study. Guided by the following research questions and hypotheses, this study seeks to assess the application of Peace Journalism principles and explore its framing patterns and themes. To deepen and contextualise the findings, Chapter 5 outlines adds an additional interpretative lens using different theoretical perspectives. These

theoretical frameworks provide a structural lens through which to assess how conflict narratives emerge and circulate within TikTok discourse.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions and hypothesis:

Qualitative

Q1: To what extent do TikTok influencers engaging in citizen journalism incorporate Peace Journalism principles when covering on international conflicts?

Q2: What common themes or patterns emerge in TikTok influencers' coverage of international conflicts for both Peace Journalism and War Journalism practices?

Quantitative

Hypothesis: Given that influencers have a potential influential impact on a mass audience, it is expected that violence-inciting content during times of crisis may be correlated with more likes, views, shares, saves, and comments than less violence-inciting content.

This chapter is structured as follows. It begins by outlining the epistemological foundation of the study, which draws on both interpretivist and critical perspectives. It then presents interpretive content analysis as the methodological approach, contextualised through the Peace Journalism Model (PJM), which serves as the primary analytical framework for this study. A brief description of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is also introduced as a complementary analytical lens and is further contextualised later in the chapter. An overview of how engagement metrics were integrated into the analysis is also provided. This is followed by a detailed description of the data collection procedures, social media selection criteria, and ethical considerations. The subsequent section introduces the case study, which provides the contextual scope for the analysis. The chapter concludes with an overview of the data analysis procedures and a brief reflection on researcher reflexivity. Throughout the chapter, methodological limitations are also acknowledged to ensure transparency in the research process.

3.2. Epistemological Positioning

This study is grounded in both interpretivist and critical epistemological perspectives. It assumes that meaning is constructed through human interpretation and simultaneously shaped by power relations, ideology, and discursive practices. From an interpretivist standpoint, social media content is approached not merely as data but as socially produced narratives shaped by content creators, audiences, and platform affordances. The use of interpretative content analysis, outlined in detail below and supported by the McLuhanist perspectives discussed in Chapter 2, reinforces this understanding of meaning-making. From a critical perspective, social media is also conceptualised as a mediated space in which power, ideology, and dominant discourses are reproduced, negotiated, or challenged. This is especially relevant in examining how social media influencers (SMIs) and platform algorithms contribute to the construction and circulation of conflict narratives. The critical epistemological dimension guiding this study draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA views language “its own small contribution to reproducing and/or transforming society and culture, including power relations” (Fairclough & al., 2011, p.17). It is particularly useful in examining how SMIs contribute, consciously or not, to the production and legitimisation of conflict narratives, shaping audience perceptions through linguistic framing, ideological positioning, and the affordances of TikTok’s algorithmic ecosystem. Nonetheless, the following sections will outline how these epistemological perspectives inform the methodological approach and guide the analysis.

3.3. Methodological and Analytical Approach

This research adopts a dominant-qualitative methodological approach, integrating interpretative content analysis, guided by the Peace Journalism Model (PJM), and Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA) as complementary analytical lenses to deepen the analysis by examining how language, power, and ideology shape these narratives at the discursive level. This aligns with the study's interpretivist and critical epistemological positioning, in which meaning is both constructed and situated within broader structures of influence. Moreover, engagement metrics are incorporated as a quantitative component to contextualise the visibility and circulation of narratives within the TikTok environment, rather than determining causal effects. Taken together, these approaches operate across methodological and analytical levels, allowing for a more holistic understanding of how influencer-driven content is produced, framed, and engaged with.

3.3.1. Interpretative Content Analysis: Peace Journalism Model

Unlike basic content analysis, which focuses on frequency counts, interpretive content analysis facilitates context-sensitive coding and in-depth narrative examination (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). This method allows for an exploration of both intended and unintended meanings, which is particularly relevant when assessing whether SMIs, consciously or unconsciously, adopt peace-oriented or conflict-escalating narratives. To operationalise this analysis, the Peace Journalism Model (PJM) is used as the primary evaluative framework. Initially conceptualised as a set of key questions for war correspondents (Galtung, 1985), the model helps guide the analysis of manifest content, as illustrated in the first chapter. This model has since been refined into a structured methodology (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2013), making it a suitable tool for examining whether TikTok influencers' narratives align with peace-oriented reporting or contribute to conflict escalation.

However, Lynch and McGoldrick (2013) have found that using the PJM alone may not be sufficient for "capturing significant ideational distinctions in a complex discursive practice such

as journalism” (p.1055). To address this, CDA was introduced as a complementary analytical lens, enabling a more nuanced examination of the underlying power dynamics, implicit biases, and dominant narratives that shape how TikTok influencers represent international conflicts (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2013). Its analytical contribution becomes more explicit in Chapter 4, where the findings illustrate how CDA helps reveal key discursive patterns shaping the narratives. Integrating CDA with content analysis facilitates a deeper exploration of communication choices and their potential impact on shaping perceptions.

3.3.2. Quantitative Component: Engagement Metrics

Video engagement metrics, such as the number of likes, comments, shares, and downloads/saves, will be recorded to capture quantitative indicators of visibility and reach (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). While comments were not analysed qualitatively, their volume contributes to assessing the popularity of a video alongside other engagement metrics. Furthermore, the number of views was not included in the analysis. Nonetheless, view counts on TikTok do not reliably indicate active engagement. For instance, a view is registered after as little as one (1) second of watch time, and each replay of the video, whether intentional or not, adds to the total view count (Lee, 2024). This presents a limitation, as videos may appear on users’ feeds through algorithmic placement, resulting in brief or passive exposure without interaction. Additionally, videos can replay automatically if a user becomes distracted, further inflating the view count without reflecting meaningful engagement. For these reasons, the total number of views was not recorded.

Nevertheless, video engagement metrics were collected to contextualise the sampled 60 videos within the broader TikTok environment and to help test the hypothesis by calculating each video’s engagement rating. This measure was calculated by summing the engagement metrics and dividing the total by the influencer’s follower count.

Overall, by integrating qualitative and quantitative data, this study examines the relationship between Peace and War Journalism elements and audience engagement, offering insight into which types of videos attract greater attention and engagement. To support this analysis, the following section outlines the data collection design of this study.

3.4. Data Collection

Data for this study were sourced directly from TikTok using a dedicated research account. To mitigate algorithmic bias, targeted searches were conducted rather than relying solely on the For You Page¹⁶ or hashtags. This was to ensure a controlled and deliberate selection of influencers. For this reason, selecting TikTok influencers required careful attention. Thus, a multi-step sampling approach was implemented to mitigate biases. The multi-step approach outlined in the next subsection introduces a unique data-collection method leveraging TikTok's specific affordances. Particularly, the modified snowball sampling method. Thus, limitations are outlined under every step to acknowledge the novelty of this approach.

Nonetheless, navigating TikTok's anti-scraping policies posed a complication for data collection. As a researcher affiliated with a Canadian academic institution, gaining access to TikTok data is particularly challenging due to the platform's strict anti-scraping measures, which prohibit the use of automated tools or scripts to extract data (TikTok, 2024a). While TikTok has introduced a Research API to support academic research, access is currently restricted to specific regions, with Canada notably excluded from its default dataset (TikTok, 2024b). Therefore, each

¹⁶ How someone's personalized feed is referred to as.

TikTok influencer's account had to be manually retrieved and verified to confirm they follow the selection criteria of this study. This process presented a resource-intensive challenge.

3.4.1. TikTok Influencer Sampling: A Multi-Step Sampling Approach

To ensure comprehensive data collection and minimise biases while managing resource limitations, this study employed a multi-step sampling approach tailored to the platform's unique features. This process consisted of three key steps: Initial Influencer Identification; Expanding the Sample via TikTok's Stitching Feature; and Hashtag-Based Sampling for Additional Data Refinement. Given the platform-specific nature of this approach, the sampling strategy was developed specifically for this study. Thus, limitations are acknowledged at each stage to promote transparency.

Step 1: Initial Influencer Identification

TikTok's algorithm-driven platform and anti-scraping restrictions posed challenges for data collection, particularly in identifying a sample of relevant influencers. As a result, the sampling strategy required approaches beyond in-platform search functions. Publicly available online lists created by users, such as articles titled "Top TikTok Influencers to Follow" organized by theme (e.g., lifestyle, politics, health, beauty), served as an initial entry point for identifying potential influencers. This approach formed the basis of the first sampling step, which involved compiling a broad list of searchable titles to locate TikTok influencers relevant to the study.

Given the study's resource constraints, it was necessary to further narrow this search to specific thematic areas. Accordingly, the first sampling criterion focused on influencers associated with key themes like social activism, human rights advocacy, political discourse, and citizen

journalism. This decision assumed that influencers operating within these domains were more likely to engage with international conflict-related content.

Therefore, to support a systematic and replicable search process, OpenAI's ChatGPT was used to generate a list of relevant searchable titles, such as "Top TikTok accounts for citizen journalism" and "Top TikTok accounts for international conflict coverage." This strategy balanced specificity and inclusivity, helping to identify a diverse yet manageable pool of influencers while limiting irrelevant results. All influencers identified through this process were manually verified to ensure they met the study's selection criteria.

The overarching objective was to assemble a sample that reflected a broad range of perspectives, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of how international conflicts are framed on TikTok. During this step, it became evident that many identified influencers predominantly advocated for Palestinian perspectives. To address this imbalance and strengthen analytical breadth, targeted Google searches were conducted to identify counter-narratives and include influencers representing differing viewpoints.

Limitation: Selection Bias

As these searchable lists were compiled manually by other users on the Internet, they may naturally prioritise certain influencers over others, leading to selection bias. The individuals or organisations that create such lists may highlight specific perspectives, potentially influencing the study's sample in unintended ways. However, the subsequent sampling steps, which relied directly on TikTok's platform features, offered a partial corrective by broadening the sample and reducing reliance on externally curated sources.

Step 2: Expanding the Sample via TikTok's Stitching Feature

In the second step, the study employed a modified snowball sampling technique using TikTok's stitching feature, an innovative method unique to this research. Stitching enables any content creator (User A) to incorporate another creator's video (User B) into their own. Thereby creating a direct link between the two pieces of content. This feature is exclusive to TikTok and serves as a means for influencers to build upon, react to, or critique one another's content.

This process operated as follows: Based on the initial list of TikTok influencers generated in Step 1, each video posted within the defined timeframe was reviewed to determine whether it was a stitched video originating from another influencer. Whenever a stitched video was identified, the original creator from whom the video was stitched was added to the list of influencers to be verified against the selection criteria. Regardless of whether the influencer met the criteria, Step 2 was repeated for their content to identify any further stitched videos. As influencers often use stitching to engage in debates, respond to breaking news, or contextualise and add to existing content, this approach facilitated the identification of additional influencers actively participating in the discourse on international conflicts.

By analysing videos that utilised the stitching feature, this method expanded the sample size by capturing a broader range of voices within the TikTok community. This step-based approach allowed for the inclusion of influencers who were not part of the initial list. For example, a beauty influencer could be incorporated into the study through a stitched video, provided they met the remaining selection criteria.

Limitation : Network Bias

A limitation of relying on stitched videos is the potential for homogeneity in the dataset, as influencers who engage with one another may share similar perspectives, audiences, or ideological leanings. This method can reinforce existing social media echo chambers, limiting exposure to counter-narratives or alternative viewpoints. At the same time, however, the stitching feature can also be used to directly challenge or respond to opposing views, providing opportunities for contrasting perspectives to emerge within the list of TikTok influencers.

Step 3: Hashtag-Based Sampling for Additional Data Refinement

The third step centred on identifying additional content by extracting a list of hashtags used by influencers in the previous selection rounds. Each hashtag was searched using the study's TikTok account, and the top five videos returned were reviewed. Influencer accounts associated with these videos were then verified to ensure they met the study's selection criteria. Hashtags play a crucial role in TikTok's content discovery and algorithmic recommendation system, making them an essential tool for expanding the TikTok influencer list.

By incorporating hashtags from both initially identified influencers and those discovered through stitching, this iterative process helps to address potential blind spots from the earlier rounds. Moreover, aggregating hashtags from various sources ensured that the sample included a broader representation of influencers engaging with international conflict narratives on TikTok.

Limitations: Sampling Bias, Hashtag Ambiguity, and Algorithmic Bias

According to Tufekci (2014) and Hargittai (2020), relying on hashtags for social media research can introduce methodological issues. First, sampling bias from selecting which hashtags to use, which can reflect the researcher's preconceptions (Tufekci, 2014; Hargittai, 2020). To

minimise this limitation, hashtags were extracted from influencers identified in previous selection steps better to ensure the inclusion of relevant and diverse hashtag term (Tufekci, 2014).

Second, hashtag ambiguity presents an additional limitation, as many TikTok hashtags carry multiple meanings, making their relevance difficult to determine without contextual analysis. For example, hashtags such as #News, #Christian, #Trauma, and #UnitedNations were used by some influencers in videos addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (the case study of this research).

Finally, algorithmic bias also presents a limitation, as TikTok's personalized recommendation system may display different content to users based on prior activity, shaping which narratives are made visible (Bishop, 2018). To reduce the influence of personalization mechanisms during data collection, a new TikTok account with no prior engagement history was created for research purposes.

All in all, given the various challenges associated with relying on hashtags to construct a dataset, this method was employed only in the final step of sampling. Through this tailored multi-step approach, the study aims to enhance both the validity and diversity of the dataset, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of how international conflicts are represented by popular TikTok influencers.

3.4.3. TikTok Influencers Selection Criteria

The multi-step sampling approach described above is designed to assemble a pool of eligible TikTok influencers based on the selection criteria detailed below. In total, 36 eligible influencers from diverse backgrounds were identified. To meet the study's sample size requirements, a random selection was conducted to reduce the sample to 30 influencers, from

whom two videos will be chosen for analysis, for a total of 60 videos. This sample size is consistent with comparable studies employing similar methodologies and accounts for the manual time and analytical resources required to examine each video. Furthermore, 60 videos is considered more than adequate to observe recurring patterns in framing while remaining feasible for detailed coding (Hennick et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the selection criteria define how both influencers and videos were considered appropriate for this study.

Selection Criteria

For this study, TikTok influencers were required to have a minimum of 100,000 followers, with no upper limit. This threshold aligns with research identifying macro-influencers as possessing higher perceived popularity and opinion leadership (Conde & Casais, 2023). This criterion directly supports the study's objective of examining influencer-driven content and its potential influence on audiences, as established in Chapter 2.

Moreover, both verified and unverified accounts are eligible, provided the account is managed by an individual, excluding accounts with multiple content creators. This criterion was applied to ensure the analysis focused on individual influencers rather than collectively managed accounts. For similar reasons, influencers affiliated with news outlets will be excluded from the study. This ensures the inclusion of citizen journalism rather than professional journalism. Furthermore, the influencer was not directly located in the conflict zone but may share content created within it (e.g., videos published by civilians). This criterion positions influencers as mediators of conflict narratives rather than direct witnesses, allowing the analysis to focus on framing practices and interpretive choices rather than firsthand reporting.

The selected influencers must have posted at least two videos related to the case study during a specific timeframe. This timeframe is between October 7th – November 7th, 2023. Reasoning will be further contextualised when describing the case study. In general, it marked the onset of significant international media attention of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In addition, to ensure that selected videos maintain significant audience engagement, each video must have garnered a minimum of 10,000 likes. However, there are no specific requirements for comments, shares, or saves. Additionally, to uphold authenticity and avoid commercial influence, videos that are part of a paid or unpaid partnership or sponsorship will be excluded from the dataset.

Overall, the selection criteria focused on identifying citizen journalists with a significant presence on TikTok. Eligibility additionally required meeting specific video-level criteria to ensure relevance to the case study and sufficient levels of visibility and engagement aligned with the study's objectives. Videos that met the criteria outlined above were subject to additional criteria described below. When an influencer had more than two eligible videos, purposeful selection was used to prioritise those with higher engagement and relevance. Random sampling was not employed.

Specifics on Video Selection

When there is more than two eligible videos to select for this study, videos were analysed to balance both audience reach and relevance. As a first basic, the videos must convey information, commentary, and/or personal opinions about the conflict. Either by serving as a primary source of content or by clarifying, correcting, or commenting on another content creator's information. Given TikTok's platform affordances, influencers may integrate external content using features

such as stitching or the green screen function¹⁷. When there are more than two videos who follow this requirement, the two most liked videos will be selected.

Finally, anchoring the study in the original definition of peace journalism, which emphasises on-the-ground reporting from conflict zones, the selection process prioritised news content that focuses on developments within Palestine and Israel. Videos that solely discuss the impact of the conflict in the United States, Canada, or individuals outside the region will not be included in the dataset. While the global ramifications of the conflict present a valuable avenue for future research, this study specifically examines how influencers frame and report on events within the direct geographical scope of the conflict.

Again, this process was implemented to ensure that the selected videos aligned with the study's objectives. Nonetheless, limitations remain within this approach.

Limitations

A key limitation of this selection criterion is that it relies on publicly available TikTok content, meaning that censorship, content moderation policies, and video removals, whether due to platform enforcement, mass reporting, or the influencer's own decisions, could have impacted data availability. Since this study focuses on highly viewed and visible content, the exclusion of removed videos may limit access to perspectives that were once widely circulated but later taken down. This introduces a potential gap in understanding how certain narratives gain or lose visibility

¹⁷ The green screen function enables influencers to overlay external visuals, such as news headlines, while discussing them in the foreground.

over time, as removed content may have played a significant role in shaping discussions before its disappearance.

Accordingly, because this study centres on individual content creators and their publicly shared material, it is essential to outline the ethical considerations guiding the research.

3.4.4. Ethical Considerations

The multi-step sampling approach was designed to capture a diverse range of TikTok influencers engaging with content related to the case study. While the sampling strategy enabled the identification of influential voices and widely circulated content, it also raised important ethical considerations. This research has adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of individuals whose publicly available TikTok content is analysed. This research was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) to guarantee that it meets ethical standards. The following highlights ethical considerations regarding consent, privacy, legal issues, confidentiality, and anonymity in social media research.

Consent

The debate surrounding the acquisition of informed consent in social media research hinges on whether the information is public or private. TikTok's platform does not require an account to access content, rendering much of its data publicly accessible. According to Moreno et al. (2013), research involving public information that does not directly interact with individuals typically does not constitute human subjects' research. Therefore, no consent is needed. Although, ethical judgment calls are still necessary when considering user agreements to privacy policies, as users might not fully grasp the extent of their data's accessibility and use by third parties (Burkell et al., 2022).

Privacy

TikTok's Terms of Service and Privacy Policy classify user-generated content as non-confidential and grant the platform broad usage rights. Users can control access to their content through privacy settings; however, public profiles remain visible to anyone. Research on publicly available TikTok content aligns with these policies, minimising privacy concerns. TikTok's policies also state that user content, once posted, waives certain privacy and approval rights (TikTok , 2021; TikTok, 2024c). Nonetheless, I intend to exclude any identifiable information or direct quotations from individuals. This approach complies with *Chapter 5: Privacy and Confidentiality in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, which states that “ethical concerns regarding privacy decrease as it becomes more difficult (or impossible) to associate information with a particular individual” (Government of Canada, 2022, p.80).

Legal

The research complies with Canada's Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act, which permits the collection of publicly available information for scholarly research without individual consent, provided that confidentiality is maintained (Government of Canada, 2000).

Confidentiality

As previously mentioned, to uphold confidentiality, any personally identifiable information obtained will be anonymised during analysis and reporting. The data will be used solely for research purposes. This commitment ensures that individuals' identities remain protected throughout the study.

Anonymity

The study is dedicated to preserving the anonymity of TikTok users by anonymising data to prevent the identification of specific individuals. No personally identifiable information will be disclosed in any publications or presentations, in accordance with ethical guidelines and institutional policies. Therefore, direct quotes that can be traced back to social media influencers will be avoided. The research aims to encourage a critical assessment of online news content without compromising individual identities.

Considering these ethical considerations, the study now turns to the case study, which serves as the analytical context for examining TikTok content.

3.5. Case Study

To contextualise the analytical framework and apply the interpretive content analysis approach, this study incorporates a case study. The case study provides a real-world illustration of how TikTok influencers engage in meaning-making around international conflicts. It focuses on the online framing of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict between October 7 and November 7, 2023, a period marked by heightened violence and public attention. The following section briefly outlines the broader context of the conflict, key events beginning on October 7, 2023, and the rationale for the selected timeframe of social media content.

3.5.1. Social Media as a Frontline for the Protracted Palestinian-Israeli Conflict¹⁸

Tensions between Israelis and Palestinians regarding the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, often referred to as the Holy Land, have persisted for over a century. The conflict is rooted in competing national claims to statehood, which have been shaped and intensified over time by various international actors and geopolitical interests (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).

Following decades of competing national movements under British mandate rule, the United Nations proposed in 1947 to partition the land into separate Jewish and Arab states, while placing Jerusalem under international administration during that period (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Against this backdrop, along with a variety of social, political, and geopolitical changes, tensions between Jewish and Arab communities in the region continued to intensify.

According to Peleg, an Israeli scholar known for his work in the fields of peace studies, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is one that is ‘psychologically charged’ and is referred to as a “value-laden feud” (2006, p.9). He continues by describing the conflict as follows:

Its protracted nature allowed the conflict to stockpile repertoires of negative images and prejudice on both sides. There is an abyss of mistrust between the belligerents, which feeds fear and hostilities. The media heat these emotions to a boiling point.

(2006, p.9)

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has historically been a focal point in international media, with narratives often shaped by political, ideological, and cultural influences. The topic returned

¹⁸ The term *Palestinian-Israeli conflict* is used to emphasise the human and societal dimensions of the conflict rather than a state-centric framing.

to the global spotlight on October 7, 2023, when "a major escalation between Gaza and Israel began" (United Nations, n.d., para. 10). The escalation prompted widespread international attention and discourse. Consequently, the conflict gained significant traction on social media. Users, regardless of follower count, actively shared and reshared news related to developments in the Middle East. The sheer volume of posts meant that events appeared repeatedly on users' feeds. Social media became saturated with content related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, especially as algorithms prioritised and circulated this type of material (Center for Strategic and International Studies, n.d.).

For this reason, the widespread circulation of the conflict made it an ideal subject for this study, highlighting how individuals, particularly social media influencers, engaged in discourse and framed narratives without the tools or expertise of conflict-specialised journalists.

Furthermore, given the protracted and complex nature of this conflict, this study examines how social media influencers navigate and present historical and contextual information to their audiences. October 7, 2023, was selected as the starting point for data collection, as it marked a significant escalation that prompted heightened public attention and online discourse. A one-month timeframe was chosen to capture the immediate surge in content production and narrative formation following this event, while maintaining a manageable and analytically coherent dataset.

With the data collection approach and case study defined, the study now turns to data capture and analysis. This begins with the operationalisation of the Peace Journalism Model, which forms the core of the study.

3.6. Data Analysis

This study relied on interpretive content analysis to examine how TikTok influencers frame international conflicts using Johan Galtung's Peace Journalism Model (PJM) as the guiding analytical framework. Incorporating this framework enabled a systematic assessment of peace- and war-oriented narrative patterns in TikTok influencer content related to the conflict. This section moves from theory to practice by outlining the key dimensions of the Peace Journalism Model, introducing the coding scheme, conceptualising and operationalising peace and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and defining data analytical tools and validation used in the study.

3.6.1. Coding Scheme Development

In this study, the PJM, the binary table introduced in Chapter 1, served as the foundation for creating the coding scheme. Thereby adopting a structured or deductive approach to coding. Categories were generated based on the four analytical dimensions of the model introduced in Chapter 1:

Peace/Conflict or War/Violence Orientation – The way influencers present conflicts, either as complex issues that can be resolved or as straightforward contests between winners and losers.

Truth or Propaganda Orientation – Whether influencers present factual, multi-sided analyses or indulge in selective framing and propaganda.

People or Elite Focused Orientation – The focus can either centre on civilian voices, marginalised groups, and local actors, or exclusively on elites, governments, and military officials.

Solution or Victory Orientation – Whether influencers emphasise peacebuilding efforts and reconciliation or depict peace solely as a matter of victory and military success.

Within each dimension, also referred to as axes, individual codes were developed based on the descriptors in PJM table outlined in Chapter 1. Referring to the PJM to operationalise the coding scheme helped reduce the researcher's potential biases that may influence the coding

scheme based on preconceived conclusions (Krippendorf, 2014). Hence, it enhances the objectivity of the coding scheme. With this aim in mind, OpenAI ChatGPT was used to assist in developing code definitions and examples, helping to limit potential bias.

To better reflect the context of this study, elements of the coding scheme were adapted by incorporating social media-specific language into code definitions and examples. These adaptations are presented in the coding scheme directly below.

Given that the PJM was not originally designed for citizen journalists producing conflict-related content from outside the conflict zone, this study represents an effort to adapt and modernise the model for contemporary social media contexts. In doing so, it also highlights areas where further theoretical development is needed.

3.6.2. Coding Scheme

Peace/Conflict-Oriented vs. War/Violence-oriented framing			
This category explores whether TikTok influencers promote dialogue, context, and peace-building or amplify conflict and division			
Peace/Conflict-Oriented			
CODE	THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
PC1	Multiperspective Conflict Framing	Acknowledges multiple parties and their goals, avoids binary "us vs. them" framing.	"This conflict involves not just two sides but various actors with different interests."
PC2	Cultural, Political and Historical Framing	Provides background on the conflict, including root causes.	"The conflict has deep historical, cultural, and political roots. Understanding this history is crucial to making sense of what's happening now and what comes next."
PC3	Inclusive Representation	Highlights perspectives from civilians and marginalised groups.	"Civilians on both sides are suffering."
PC4	Conflict Transformation Framing	Presents the conflict as the topic to tackle rather than the people involved. Focusing on conflict creativity.	"What if we focused less on blaming people and more on fixing the conflict itself?"

PC5	Humanizing Framing	Recognizes the shared humanity of all people involved in the conflict.	"No mother should have to bury their child, no matter where they are from."
PC6	Invisible effects	Sheds light on the invisible effects of violence (trauma, damage to structure/culture/communities)	"It's not just about the fighting—entire communities are being displaced, schools are shutting down, and people are carrying trauma that won't just disappear."

War/Violence-Oriented

CODE	THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
WV1	Zero-Sum Framing	Presents conflict as a battle where one side must win, and the other must lose. Similar to treating it as a sports game: 2 parties and one goal to win	"The only way to peace is total defeat of the enemy."
WV2	Focus on Immediate Events Only and decontextualises conflict	Emphasizes only recent violence without discussing its origins.	"This war started on October 7th when [one side] launched an attack"
WV3	One-Sided Narratives	Frames only one group as victims while ignoring others' suffering.	"They are the only ones who are truly suffering."
WV4	Placing Blame	Focuses on how the "other" is the problem and who prevails in war	Are Palestinians/Israelis even aware that they are the ones fuelling this entire conflict?
WV5	Dehumanizing Language	Uses language that strips the other side of humanity.	"They are not real people, they are animals. They don't deserve to live"
WV6	Sensationalism	Focuses only on the visible effects of violence (casualties, wounded and material damage)	"They murdered babies, who would do such a thing!"

Truth-Oriented vs Propaganda -oriented

This category assesses whether influencers prioritize fact-checking and balanced reporting or spread misinformation and bias

Truth-Oriented

CODE	THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
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T1	Challenging misinformation and implicit biases	Calls attention to potential misinformation, biased reporting, or misleading narratives in mainstream and social media. Encourages fact-checking and critical thinking.	This image has been shared everywhere, but if you reverse search it, you'll see it's actually from a different event years ago.
T2	Transparent & Verifiable Information	Shares diverse perspectives and reliable sources.	"Here are multiple sources reporting on the same event." Including duets, stitches, and displayed images/videos in the content

Propaganda-Oriented

CODE	THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
PR1	Selective information & narrative reinforcement	Amplifies selective facts or misinformation to support a specific agenda. Presents biased information as absolute truth without questioning sources.	"This video proves everything we've been saying—look at what they're doing! No wonder we're on the right side."
PR2	Selective/Opaque Reporting	Uses unverified claims or omits key details.	This video proves everything we've been saying—look at what they're doing! No wonder we're on the right side.

People-Oriented vs. Elite-Oriented

This category evaluates whether influencers centre the experience of civilians and marginalised voices or align with political elites and power structures by amplifying their perspectives

People-Oriented

CODE	THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
PE1	Platform to Amplify Marginalised Voices	Uses their platform to include voices and stories of those affected by the conflict. (videos, stitches, duets)	"I want to share with you all something that I saw from [the affected area] posted on their account."
PE2	Give name to all evildoers	Holds all actors accountable for wrongdoing, including governments, rebels, corporations, and institutions.	"Both the government and opposition forces have engaged in violence."

PE3	Focus on People Peacemakers	Highlights the role of ordinary people, grassroots organizations, activists, and community leaders in peace-making. Emphasises bottom-up, collective peace efforts rather than state-driven initiatives.	"Local peacebuilders are helping communities heal."
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Elite-Oriented

CODE	THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
EL1	Platform to Amplify Elite Voices	Uses their platform to share and elevate the messages, opinions, or statements of governments, politicians, or other institutional elites without critique or additional context	"Can you believe what [government official, for example] posted on their X account?"
EL2	Give Name to Their Evildoers	Selectively names only the opposition as evildoers, while elites, state actors, or allies remain uncriticized.	"The resistance group is full of criminals, while our government is protecting democracy."
EL3	Focus on Elite Peacemakers	Centres on politicians, diplomats, military leaders, and international organisations as the primary agents of peace. Presents top-down, state-led negotiations as the main or only path to peace.	"United Nations diplomats, alongside world leaders, are negotiating a ceasefire to bring an end to hostilities."

Solution-Oriented vs. Victory-oriented

This category identifies whether influencers emphasizes peace-building efforts or focus solely on who is winning the war.

Solution-Oriented

CODE	THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
SO1	Longterm Peace	Describes peace or conflict resolution as something that continues beyond ending direct violence involving non-violent and creative solutions.	"We need de-escalation and dialogue."
SO2	Highlight Peace Initiatives	Discusses peace initiatives and highlights their importance in preventing future wars	"Peace talks aren't just about ending this war—they're about making sure the next one never happens."

S03	Peaceful Society	Emphasizes deep, systemic change in society to build lasting peace. Encourages inclusivity, reconciliation, and grassroots involvement in peacebuilding.	"Real peace isn't just about signing treaties—it's about changing the systems that created conflict in the first place."
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Victory-Oriented

CODE	THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
VI1	Short-term Peace	Describes peace or conflict resolution as something that can be obtained immediately if one side gains victory or a ceasefire is signed.	"We need a ceasefire now to end the violence!"
VI2	Conceals or Downplays Peace Initiatives	Peace talks are ignored or delegitimized unless they align with the goal of military victory.	"Negotiating now would be a mistake—we need to win first, then talk about peace."
VI3	Controlled Society	Views peace as a matter of laws, policies, and formal agreements rather than societal transformation. Prioritizes stability over justice, often reinforcing power structures.	"They need peace treaties signed to avoid another war."

3.6.3. Conceptualisation and Operationalisation

This subsection clarifies how peace and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are conceptualised and operationalised within the coding framework. It begins by outlining how peace is understood in the context of peace journalism, followed by an explanation of how CDA is applied in the analysis.

Peace

According to Galtung (1969), peace is not simply the absence of violence. He distinguishes between negative peace, which refers to the absence of direct physical violence, and positive peace, which involves the presence of social justice, equality, and structures that prevent indirect or

structural violence¹⁹. For example, calling a ceasefire or signing a peace treaty can be understood as forms of negative peace, as they halt direct violence without necessarily addressing the underlying causes of conflict. This is comparable to placing tape over a hole in a water pipe: the leak may temporarily stop, but without structural repair, the pressure eventually exposes the weakness and the problem resurfaces.

In this study, peace is operationalised through indicators associated with both negative and positive peace. Indicators of negative peace encompass the absence of dehumanising language, incitement, or calls to violence. Positive peace is characterised by content that promotes empathy, mutual understanding, inclusion, or addresses the root causes of injustice. Peace Journalism embodies hope for positive peace.

Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Fairclough (2010), discourse is both shaped by and shaping social reality. He conceptualises discourse as operating across three interconnected dimensions: spoken or written **text**, which is the process of a **discursive practice**, and, thus, shaping **social practice**. Together, “these are three perspectives one can take upon, three complementary ways of reading, a complex social event” (Fairclough, 2010, p.94).

At the text level, which relates to this study’s primary unit of analysis, attention is directed to language use itself. This includes word choice, rhetorical purpose, intended audience, and linguistic features such as modality and emphasis. For example, the analysis considers whether

¹⁹ Structural violence refers to the invisible and normalised forms of harm embedded in social, political, and economic structures that perpetuate inequality and marginalisation, even in the absence of direct conflict. These forms of harm are often reinforced through cultural narratives and media representations, which Galtung (1969) refers to as cultural violence. More on this in Chapter 5.1. Theoretical Interpretations.

modal verbs are used to signal certainty (e.g. must, clearly, cannot), as well as the presence of emotional intensifiers or absolutist language. At the level of discursive practice, the analysis examines how influencers embed, select, and narrate external content using platform features such as stitching, green-screen overlays, and screenshots. Although the external content itself was not systematically coded, this dimension focuses on how influencers comment on, reinterpret, or reframe that content, thereby reshaping its original meaning. Finally, social practice refers to the broader social implications of these meaning-making processes.

It is noteworthy that CDA offered a complementary analytical lens alongside the PJM, which served as the primary analytical framework. While CDA was not applied as a formal methodology, it informed the interpretation of recurring patterns and themes identified in the data, as discussed in the results and findings in Chapter 4. As a complementary lens, CDA provided insights into the potential social implications of influencer-driven narratives without making causal claims.

Having outlined the coding scheme and its operationalisation, the following section turns to the analytical limitations of this study.

3.6.4. Analytical Limitations

This study aimed to capture nuance to better understand the phenomenon under investigation. However, several limitations must be acknowledged for transparency, including the scope of the unit of analysis, the absence of intercoder reliability, and the opacity of platform algorithms.

At the outset, because this research adopts a discourse approach, focusing primarily on the spoken and written text in TikTok videos, it has inherent limitations in capturing the full scope of

the meaning conveyed. TikTok allows creators to embed external media, such as videos and images, into their own content, which can potentially further influence how viewers interpret the message. In many cases, these external media served as sources to reinforce the influencer's claims. When external speech clips were included (e.g. a political leader's press release), it was transcribed, and speakers were noted where possible. However, other forms of embedded media, such as visuals, also added an emotional or symbolic layer. Hence, a visual analysis would have provided a deeper analysis, an aspect that lies beyond the limits of the current language-based methodology. Similarly, an analysis of qualitative engagement metrics, such as comments, could have further enriched this study's findings regarding impact.

Furthermore, another key limitation of the coding process is the use of a single coder, particularly when the coder is also the researcher (Krippendorff, 2014). This may introduce risks to both reliability and validity, as preconceived assumptions and potential biases can influence how data are grouped and interpreted. To enhance transparency, the coding scheme is presented in this chapter, allowing it to be scrutinised and potentially applied by others analysing news-related content, particularly on social issues. Moreover, OpenAI's ChatGPT was used as a research-support tool to help minimise subjectivity in the synthesis of coded data. The tool served as an aid in articulating ideas, while all conceptual framing, interpretation, and final writing remained the result of the researcher's own analysis. Nonetheless, in the absence of multiple coders, researcher reflexivity becomes especially important and is addressed later in this chapter.

Finally, while this study operates under the assumption that user engagement contributes to shaping algorithmic recommendations, the lack of transparency surrounding TikTok's algorithmic processes presents a limitation to fully understanding how content visibility fluctuates.

Therefore, some of this study's findings and discussions may lack validity between the link of encouraging video engagement and adhering to PJM principles.

Ultimately, while this study's methodological choices present certain boundaries, they also illuminate the complexity of meaning-making in digital spaces. By acknowledging these limitations and encouraging the reuse of the coding scheme, this research invites a more collective, iterative exploration of how conflict and social issues are framed on platforms like TikTok, and potentially others (current and new ones). In doing so, it aims not only to analyse media narratives, but also to encourage critical engagement with them.

3.6.5. Data Analysis Tool and Validation

Data recording was carried out using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software commonly used in social science research. A one-year licence is provided free of charge to students affiliated with the University of Ottawa. A trial analysis was conducted to assess the applicability of the coding scheme, and necessary adjustments were made to optimise the organisation and capture of data for more effective analysis. Additionally, the interpretations of the data have been thoroughly reviewed and validated in collaboration with the thesis supervisor for this research.

3.7. Researcher's Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an inherent feature of both qualitative and quantitative research, as it acknowledges that the research process actively shapes the phenomena it seeks to describe (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021). Rather than passively "discovering" reality, researchers' assumptions, positionality, and methodological choices actively constitute the social realities under study (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021).

In this study, coding functioned as the primary site of data creation and was therefore approached reflexively. The development of categories and themes, including the adaptation of the Peace Journalism Model to reflect SMIs as citizen journalists, was inevitably shaped by my own assumptions and interpretations of this role. This reflects Garfinkel's (1967) notion of circularity in coding, whereby analytic categories are influenced by the researcher's prior understanding of the phenomenon. To help mitigate this risk, ChatGPT was used as a reflexive support tool to externalise and question interpretive reasoning rather than generate or assign codes. Recognising this circularity enabled a more reflexive coding process, in which analytic decisions were continuously examined for how they shaped emerging patterns and themes.

As Sadaña (2016) notes, coding relies heavily on analysts' decisions about what to notice, group, interpret, and present none of which are neutral acts. Reflexivity therefore requires acknowledging how such decisions shape what becomes visible or meaningful in the findings (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021). Additionally, analytical tools such as NVivo carry their own epistemic assumptions, which can further influence how meaning is organised and interpreted within the data (Whitaker & Atkinson, 2021). In other words, it can subtly guide how to see and structure data, which in turn affects interpretation.

Overall, reflexivity plays an active role in shaping both interpretation and knowledge construction throughout the analytical process. This study therefore treats reflexivity not as a limitation to be eliminated, but as a guiding principle through which assumptions are made visible and critically examined. As discussed in Chapter 1's "*Walk the Talk: Reader's Self-Reflection as the Basis of this Study*", readers are likewise invited to reflect on their own positionality and the ways it may shape their engagement with the findings. Grounded in this reflexive approach, the following chapter turns to the presentation and interpretation of the study's findings.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND FINDINGS DISCUSSION

As outlined in the preceding chapters, individuals in North America increasingly turn to social media platforms, particularly TikTok, for news and information about current events (Pew Research Center, 2023; Statista, 2023). Although Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are not bound by formal journalistic standards nor compliant to codes of ethics, many are nonetheless perceived as credible sources, often due to factors such as perceived authenticity, social capital, follower count, and parasocial relationships with audiences (Schmuck & Harff, 2023). As established in this study, SMIs have become influential actors in shaping public discourse and opinion.

This shift toward social media consumption intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and has persisted in the years since, with TikTok emerging as a prominent platform for both entertainment and news, including news presented in entertainment-oriented formats (Hautea et al., 2021). Central to this dynamic is TikTok's algorithm-driven and participatory environment, which curates content based on user interaction and reinforces patterns of engagement through features such as comments, shares, stitches, and duets.

Against this backdrop, the growing influence of SMIs raises important questions about how social issues and conflict-related narratives are framed and disseminated online. To which this chapter sets to present the findings.

Consequently, this study adopts a qualitative-dominant approach to examine how social media influencers engage with and frame international conflicts. TikTok influencer content was analysed using the Peace Journalism Model (PJM) as the primary coding framework. In addition, elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) were integrated to deepen the examination of language use and framing practices.

This chapter is organised around the study's research questions and hypothesis. It begins with the presentation of quantitative findings related to engagement metrics, followed by qualitative findings derived from the PJM-based coding. Direct quotations were omitted to protect individuals' privacy (as discussed in the ethical considerations in Chapter 3) and to limit the reproduction of violent or polarising narratives. Broader interpretations, theoretical implications, and recommendations for future research are addressed in Chapter 5.

The research questions and hypothesis guiding this chapter are as follows:

Qualitative

Q1: To what extent do TikTok influencers engaging in citizen journalism incorporate Peace Journalism principles when covering on international conflicts?

Q2: What common themes or patterns emerge in TikTok influencers' coverage of international conflicts for both Peace Journalism and War Journalism practices?

Quantitative

Hypothesis: Given that influencers have a potential influential impact on a mass audience, it is expected that violence-inciting content during times of crisis may be correlated with more likes, views, shares, saves, and comments than less violence-inciting content.

4.1. Quantitative Findings: Engagement and Violence

Research Hypothesis

Violence-inciting content will correlate with higher engagement metrics than non-violence-inciting content.

4.1.1. Descriptive Statistics

Engagement Metrics

While readers may draw their own interpretations from the table below based on their experience with TikTok, this study also provides general interpretations to situate the sample

within the broader TikTok context. In general, the engagement metrics across the analysed TikTok videos show substantial variation, particularly in terms of likes and comments. It is noteworthy that four videos had their comment sections deactivated. This may reflect a deliberate choice by creators to avoid harassment, reduce negative feedback, limit the spread of misinformation, particularly in the context of sensitive or polarizing content, or to maintain greater control over the tone of discourse (Cotter, 2021). The following table illustrates a summary of the engagement metrics by outlining the average, median, minimum and maximum of each metric.

Table 4.1

Video Engagement Metrics Summary table (60 videos in total)

Metric	Average	Median	Min	Max
Likes ²⁰	198,253	104,250	10,700	1,400,000
Comments	5,173	3,193	3	33,700
Saves	18,010	8,663	514	92,100
Shares	13,672	5,500	301	101,900

These figures suggest several interpretations regarding engagement fluctuations relating to the 60 videos collected for this study. On TikTok, videos that go viral typically accumulate disproportionately high numbers of likes, comments, shares, and saves. Based on the maximum values presented above, particularly when contrasted with the average and median, it can be inferred that a small number of videos in the dataset experienced viral circulation, most notably in terms of likes. In contrast, the remaining videos generated more modest levels of interaction.

²⁰ The minimum for likes to be eligible for selection criteria was 10,000 likes. Refer to Chapter 3, section 3.4.3. TikTok Influencers Selection Criteria for a full list.

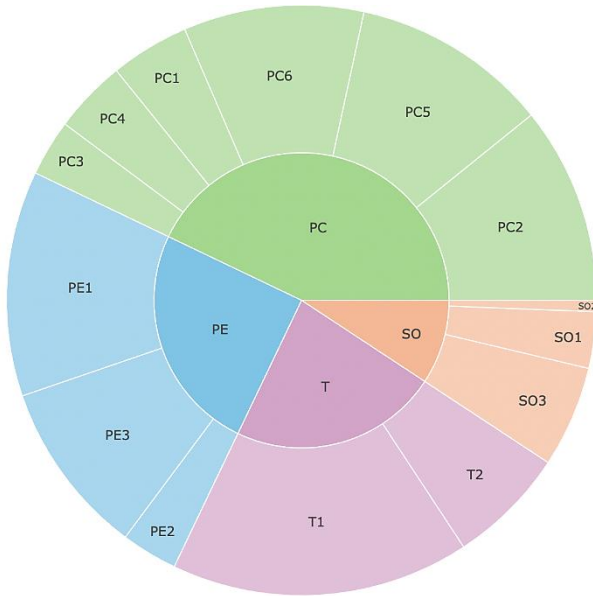
Notably, saves, shares, and comments serve as meaningful indicators of audience behaviour and engagement. Comments provide qualitative insight into audience responses, while shares represent a quantitative signal of engagement, indicating that viewers were compelled to circulate the content beyond their own feeds. Overall, the table offers a broad snapshot of engagement patterns within the dataset. To deepen this analysis, the following section turns to a detailed examination of the qualitative codes identified through content analysis.

Coding per Axis

Coding followed the scheme outlined in Chapter 3. Each relevant code was typically applied once, unless it captured distinct thematic content within the same video. In such cases, a code could be used more than once to reflect the layered presence of a concept. For instance, if a video depicted the invisible effects of violence on both Palestinian and Israeli civilians, code PC6 would be applied to each segment. This approach ensured that the salience of Peace Journalism (PJ) and War Journalism (WJ) elements was accurately represented without compromising analytical rigour. Double-coding was applied cautiously to avoid overstating interpretations, particularly in longer videos where this was more likely.

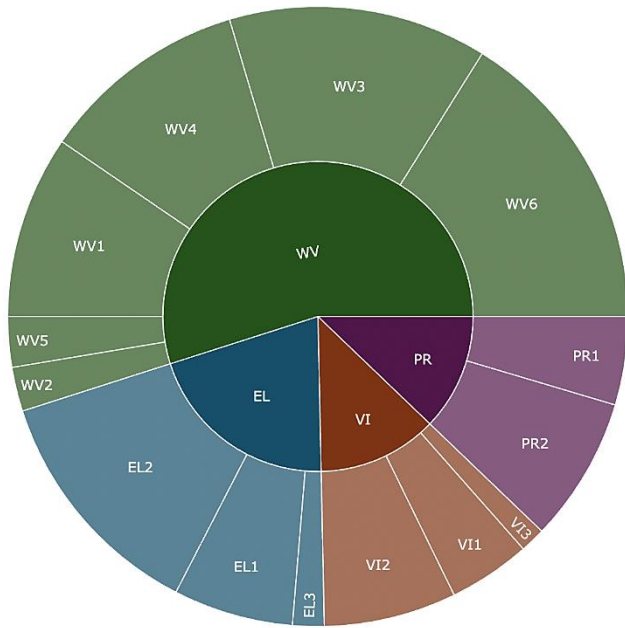
That said, this may increase the risk of skewing data interpretations or introducing outliers. Such coding can be observed in both numeric tables below by subtracting the coding references by codes coding.

Figure 1. Peace Journalism Coding Sunburst Visual and Numeric Table²¹



Coding Axis	Coding References Total by Axis	Codes coding per axis	Code	Coding References by Code	Codes coding per code
PC	160	53	PC1	14	13
			PC2	35	33
			PC3	10	9
			PC4	13	12
			PC5	35	32
			PC6	32	45
T	74	49	T1	53	45
			T2	21	19
PE	81	42	PE1	40	35
			PE2	10	9
			PE3	31	26
SO	30	20	SO1	10	10
			SO2	2	2
			SO3	18	17

Figure 2. War Journalism Coding Sunburst and Numeric Table



Coding Axis	Coding References Total by Axis	Codes coding per axis	Code	Coding References by Code	Codes coding per code
WV	168	54	WV1	29	28
			WV2	7	7
			WV3	41	36
			WV4	33	33
			WV5	8	8
			WV6	49	41
PR	37	25	PR1	14	14
			PR2	23	23
EL	62	40	EL1	19	14
			EL2	38	34
			EL3	5	4
VI	38	28	VI1	13	11
			VI2	21	21
			VI3	4	4

²¹ The sunburst diagrams were created with the assistance of *ChatGPT* (OpenAI, 2025), using Python data visualization tools such as *plotly.express*. The data input—including coding references and hierarchy of nodes (axes, sub-axes, and codes), was provided by the researcher based on NVivo coding exports. Colour schemes were customized to match the visual identity of each Peace Journalism and War Journalism axis. All visual outputs were reviewed and approved by the researcher for accuracy and alignment with the study’s coding structure.

It is noteworthy that, in almost all cases, the PJ and WJ codes coexisted within the same video. Conceptually, this can be imagined as a continuum, where each coding reference contributes to indicating the video's overall orientation. This notion will be further elaborated upon when discussing orientation scores. It is important to acknowledge that combining WJ and PJ elements does not align with Johan Galtung's original vision of authentic Peace Journalism (2013). However, this dual coding allowed for a more nuanced analysis of the complex and at times contradictory strategies used by influencers.

Similarly, multiple PJ and WJ codes could be applied to the same segment. For example, if the video included Israeli civilian perspectives, both *Platform for Marginalised Voices* (PE1) and *Inclusive Representation* (PC4) could be applied depending on how it was presented. Henceforth, if the segment introduced emotional rhetoric, then *Sensationalism* (WV6) may also have applied. This captures the nuances of influencer framing by allowing segments to be evaluated as multidimensional rather than forcing them into a singular journalistic orientation.

Overall, figures 1 and 2 illustrate the tendencies of Peace Journalism and War Journalism across the 60 analysed videos. In both sunburst visuals, the green shade, representing about half of the diagrams, highlights how influencers framed the conflict with their audience. As shown in the diagrams, War Journalism practices appear more prevalent than Peace Journalism practices, suggesting a greater tendency to contribute to narratives that may polarise rather than unify. Patterns and themes emerging from the dataset will be discussed under exploration of the second research question under section 4.4.

Given the central role of the Peace/Conflict and War/Violence axis in framing peace and violence-inciting content, the following section examines whether videos with higher WV codes received greater audience engagement, as hypothesised in this study. The remaining axes will be explored in greater depth in the subsequent sections.

4.1.2. Testing the Hypothesis

To test the hypothesis, all videos were examined to explore the degree of War Journalism and Peace Journalism tendencies. The analysis specifically focused on coding from the Peace/Conflict and War/Violence axes, excluding other dimensions from the Peace Journalism Model to isolate content most directly related to violence-specific framing. The remaining axes of the PJM capture variations in actor representation, claims to truth and legitimacy, and orientations toward resolution, rather than direct constructions of violence. This decision was grounded in the hypothesis that emotional intensity and conflict-centred framing would more significantly influence audience engagement. In short, the correlation was not statistically significant within the constraints of this study. The following paragraphs explain how this conclusion was reached and explore possible reasons behind it.

Engagement Rating & Orientation Score

By calculating each video's engagement rating, we were able to determine which videos received higher engagement from audiences. Since views or reach data was not consistently available for all TikTok videos, engagement rate was calculated using total engagements metrics to follower count. This method, referred to as *Engagement Rate by Followers (ERF)*, is a commonly used proxy in social media research when reach or impression data are inaccessible (Socialinsider, 2023). The ERF formula divides the sum of likes, comments, shares, and saves by

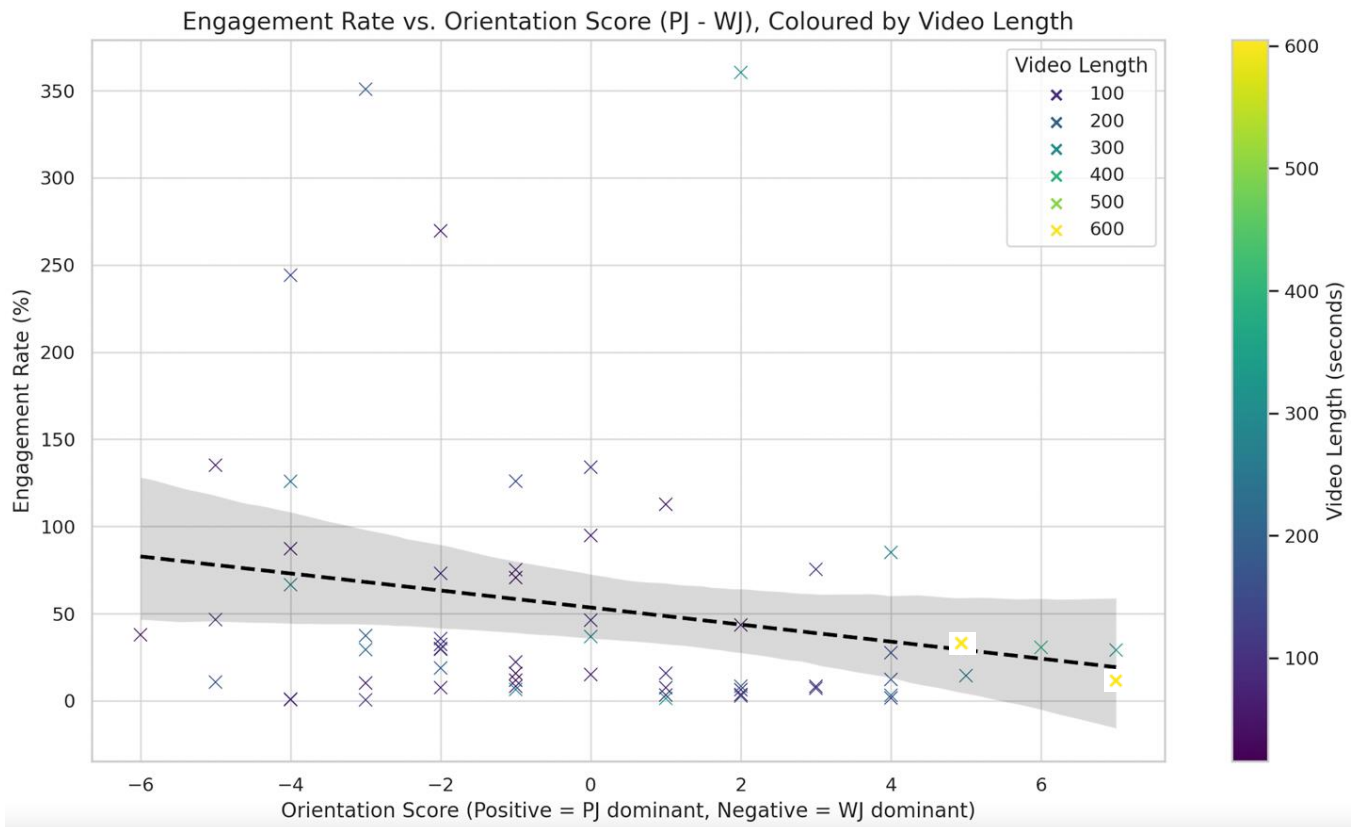
the TikTok influencer's total follower count at the time of posting, then multiplies by 100 to produce a percentage. While this approach assumes all followers are potential viewers (which may lead to conservative estimates of engagement), it offers a standardised method for comparing influencer activity across accounts. This method likely underestimates actual engagement when compared to reach- or view-based calculations, as not all followers view every piece of content. However, in the absence of such analytics, ERF offers a practical and replicable metric for comparative analysis.

Furthermore, an orientation score was calculated for each video by subtracting the total number of War/Violence axis codes from the total number of Peace/Conflict axis codes (P/C minus W/V). A positive score indicates a stronger Peace/Conflict orientation, whereas a negative score indicates a stronger War/Violence orientation.

Visual and Statistical Details of Results

To examine the relationship between the orientation score and the engagement rating (%), a scatterplot was created to visualise the results. The orientation score is the independent variable and engagement rate as the dependent variable. Video length is also included as a variable to account for the possibility that longer videos may contain more double-coding, which could influence the orientation score.

Figure 3. Engagement Rate by Orientation Score (P/C – W/V) ²²



Although a slight negative trend is visible, suggesting that WJ-dominant videos may generate higher engagement rates, this relationship was not statistically significant ²³. A Spearman’s rank correlation revealed a weak, negative association between orientation score and engagement rate, $\rho = -0.24$, $p = .070$. Similarly, a Pearson correlation yielded $r = -0.20$, $p = .124$. Both Spearman and Pearson correlations were used to account for potential linear and non-linear

²² The scatterplot was generated with the assistance of *ChatGPT* (OpenAI, 2025), using Python-based statistical and visualization libraries including *pandas*, *matplotlib*, and *scipy* for statistical analysis (Pearson and Spearman correlations). The dataset and parameters used were provided by the researcher. ChatGPT served as a computational and interpretive assistant, and all outputs were verified and interpreted by the researcher.

²³ Spearman’s rank and Pearson correlation coefficients were also computed with the assistance of OpenAI’s ChatGPT (GPT-4, 2025) using the SciPy. Stats package (module within the SciPy library in Python that provides a large number of statistical functions) to assess associations between engagement rate and orientation score. Raw data and procedures were provided by the researcher to ensure output accuracy.

associations in the data. Nonetheless, neither result reached statistical significance ($p < .05$), the downward trend supports existing research suggesting that emotionally intense or conflict-oriented content tends to generate higher engagement online.

4.1.3. Interpretation

While data suggest that videos framed through War/Violence-oriented journalism received higher engagement than those framed through Peace/Conflict-oriented journalism, the correlation was not statistically significant. This slightly contrasts with prior research showing that emotionally provocative or conflict-driven content tends to gain more visibility and engagement. Something often attributed to algorithmic amplification, sensationalism, and attention-based marketing (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Tandoc, 2014). Several factors may explain this divergence.

The opacity of TikTok's algorithm makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions in relation to the hypothesis. Additionally, the absence of visual analysis in this study may have contributed to some divergence from existing findings in the literature. Nonetheless, TikTok remains a highly participatory environment in which countless forms of content are produced, circulated, and engaged with each day. While the precise drivers of virality cannot be definitively determined, the platform hosts a wide range of content categories, each with the potential to gain visibility.

Importantly, the platform's design, like that of many other social media platforms, creates opportunities for users to share alternative or underrepresented narratives and to gain meaningful traction. For instance, during humanitarian crises, content that challenges "us versus them" framings, highlights the less visible impacts of violence, or seeks to humanize all affected groups may resonate strongly with audiences (Abidin, 2021). In a similar light, the growing prominence of citizen journalism on social media platforms may reflect shifting public preferences. These

preferences appear to favour narratives of solidarity, accountability, and shared humanity over purely sensational or conflict-escalating framings (Kaun & Uldam, 2018).

Therefore, this raises a broader question. Do violence-inciting or sensational narratives gain traction because they are inherently more engaging, or are audience responses shaped by contextual factors, such as timing and prevailing socio-emotional needs, including desires for justice or accountability? In either case, the research questions explored next examines three videos that received comparatively higher Peace Journalism (PJ) orientation scores. Notably, the video to explore also held the highest engagement rating in the dataset, while the other two demonstrated consistently strong PJ scores relative to the broader sample. Perhaps then, a closer examination of these videos may offer insight into this question.

4.2. RQ1: Presence of Peace Journalism Principles

Research Question 1

To what extent do TikTok influencers engaging in citizen journalism incorporate Peace Journalism principles when covering on international conflicts?

4.2.1. Coding Overview

As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, through the sunburst charts and numeric table, a notable percentage of TikTok influencers in the sample incorporated both Peace Journalism and War Journalism practices. Specifically, 88.33% of influencers included Peace/Conflict-oriented elements, 81.67% demonstrated Truth-oriented elements, 70% reflected People-oriented framing, and 33.33% integrated Solution-oriented elements. In contrast, 90% of influencers exhibited War/Violence-oriented elements, 41.67% featured Propaganda-oriented content, 66.67% leaned toward Elite-oriented framing, and 46.67% included Victory-oriented elements. These findings

underscore the complexity of influencer content, where elements of both Peace and War Journalism frequently coexist.

Although Galtung would not endorse the combination of Peace Journalism and War Journalism elements, his distinction between positive and negative peace remains a useful guiding framework. Accordingly, this section acknowledges that War Journalism elements do coexist within the dataset, while placing analytical emphasis on the presence and potential of Peace Journalism elements. The broader normative aim remains the production and consumption of content that fosters positive peace, an objective incompatible with War Journalism. When Peace and War Journalism elements appear simultaneously within the same content, the capacity to cultivate positive peace is weakened, as the foundational conditions of negative peace have not yet been securely established.

At the same time, the presence of peace-oriented elements among social media influencers, many of whom may lack formal training in journalism or media ethics²⁴, can be interpreted as indicating an orientation toward social responsibility. While such content does not consistently align with Peace Journalism principles, it often reflects efforts to highlight injustice, amplify marginalised voices, and humanize those affected by conflict. The examples that follow illustrate instances in which elements of Peace Journalism emerge within broader narratives that may also incorporate aspects of War Journalism.

²⁴ Selection criteria excluded TikTok influencers affiliated with mainstream media news outlets, however, this does not exclude those who may have taken courses or received academic certifications in related fields. This would be difficult to assess as not everyone shares publicly their academic or learning background. Alternatively, some shared their academic degrees and other specialisations to give more weight to their arguments.

4.2.2. Illustrative Examples

The following examples highlight specific moments of Peace Journalism embedded within videos that scored higher on Peace Journalism orientation. To preserve the anonymity of the influencers, individual TikTok handles are not disclosed. The following examples illustrate how relevant elements from the Peace Journalism framework was reflected in some of the highest-scoring videos using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore its relation to meaning-making with the audience. Paraphrasing is used in instances where direct quotations could potentially reveal the creator's identity.

Video 1

This Peace Journalism–dominant video achieved the highest engagement rate across all videos with a rating of 360%. This level of engagement is not entirely surprising, as the content challenged entrenched narratives from an angle rarely centred in mainstream reporting or on social media. The influencer addressed how Palestinian men were portrayed in both traditional media and co-created narratives on social media, noting that such portrayals often reinforced the “terrorist” stereotype or erased them completely.

When addressing groups affected by the conflict, most videos in this study's sample primarily focused on the harms experienced by women and children. In this particular video, however, the influencer goes a step further, urging viewers to confront unconscious biases in how Palestinian men who protect their families, communities, and land are represented. The discourse highlighted how language choices can either perpetuate harmful stereotypes or erase these men's narratives altogether. This shift in focus is not to diminish the experiences of women and children;

rather, it works to expand the frame of vulnerability and resilience to include men whose humanity is often overlooked.

From a CDA perspective, this framing interrogates whose voices are centred and whose are excluded, asking critical questions such as “Who is missing here?” and “How are these individuals portrayed?” By situating Palestinian men within a humanizing frame, the influencer disrupted dominant war narratives that reduce them to singular, violent roles. This aligns with Peace Journalism’s aim of emphasising shared humanity while acknowledging invisible effects of conflict.

Although some factual claims in the video were unclear or potentially unverifiable, and a few segments were coated with sensationalism, the video stands as a valuable example of Peace Journalism. It actively promotes critical media literacy, inviting audiences to move beyond surface-level consumption of conflict narratives and consider the broader sociopolitical forces that shape how individuals are depicted. In doing so, it used the influencer’s platform to amplify marginalised perspectives and, indirectly, the work of people peacemakers.

Video 2 and 3

These two videos ranked highest in Peace Journalism orientation scores, with minimal War Journalism codes present. They are grouped together due to their similar reporting styles. Both begin by acknowledging the protracted nature of the conflict and encourage audiences to initiate or deepen their understanding by engaging with specific documents and authors. These influencers addressed the cultural, political, and historical dimensions of the land and its people, now known as Israel and the State of Palestine. They then proceed to explore these dimensions in greater depth.

Thus, offering audience a foundation for interpreting the current conflict through a more informed and multifaceted lens.

Both videos adopted a deeply human-centred lens. It rejected binary framings that put one group against another and instead situates the Palestinian-Israeli conflict within its broader historical, cultural, and political contexts. For example, one video revisited the emergence of Zionism, tracing its ideological and Eurocentric roots while contrasting it with centuries of peaceful coexistence between Jewish, Muslim, and Arab communities in historic Palestine. In doing so, it disrupted the dominant narrative that presents hostility between these groups as timeless or inevitable. Ultimately, inviting viewers to see the conflict as the product of specific political projects and colonial histories rather than inherent ethno-religious divisions. The other video dismantled the idea that the conflict is fundamentally religious, connecting it instead to the enduring legacies of settler colonialism and systemic exclusion. Also, by drawing comparisons with other colonial contexts, such as French rule in Algeria. Nonetheless, both emphasise that harm is experienced on all sides, whether through displacement, indoctrination, or political violence, and that the rights, dignity, and histories of individuals must be central to any meaningful discussion of the conflict. By citing historians, political theorists, and journalists, the creators signal an engagement with critical inquiry and verifiable information, which may counter reductive or propagandistic framings. In addition, they draw attention to marginalised perspectives by highlighting the often invisible effects of violence and acknowledging acts of resistance within both Israeli and Palestinian communities, including individuals who refuse to participate in systems they view as unjust.

From a CDA perspective, these narratives undermine entrenched power-laden discourses by reframing “sides” as shared human struggles against structural violence. This reframing not

only humanizes those often dehumanized in media portrayals but also opens space for imagining solutions rooted in justice, reparations, and reconciliation.

4.2.3. Concluding Observations

The results indicate that while Peace Journalism principles surface frequently in the selected TikTok influencers' coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, they are often intertwined with War/Violence-oriented framings. This paradox reflects both the promises and limitations of influencer-driven reporting. Still, the instinct toward social responsibility is notable, especially among influencers, presumably, without formal journalistic training.

This section highlighted videos that ranked highly in Peace Journalism elements. Although War Journalism features were still present to varying degrees, the findings point to meaningful opportunities to advance Peace Journalism within social media spaces. The next research question examines patterns and themes across both PJ and WJ in the sample, helping identify opportunities for peace-oriented communication while also flagging areas of concern.

4.3. RQ2: Thematic Patterns in Framing

Research Question 2

What common themes or patterns emerge in TikTok influencers' coverage of international conflicts for both Peace Journalism and War Journalism?

By referring to the Peace Journalism and War Journalism sunburst charts and numeric tables, we were able to identify which codes and axes were more commonly, and less frequently, integrated into TikTok influencers' videos. Code co-occurrences were also examined to further explore potential trends. This included identifying complementary patterns, where two codes from any Peace Journalism axis frequently appeared together. And, contradictory patterns, where a

Peace Journalism code often co-occurred with a conflicting War Journalism code. For example, within the People vs. Elite-oriented axis, a TikTok influencer might amplify marginalised voices while also giving significant attention to elite actors such as government officials and diplomats within the same video. Nonetheless, this section analyses key patterns within Peace Journalism and War Journalism by engaging with the following codes and axes, in sequence: T1, PE1, the Solution-oriented axis, WV6, WV3, WV4/EL2, and WV1.

As a general reminder, the Peace/Conflict versus War/Violence axis examines whether influencers frame the conflict as a shared problem requiring inclusive solutions or as a divided struggle focused on blame and emotional rhetoric. The Truth versus Propaganda axis considers whether information is transparent and verified or vague and unsupported. The People versus Elite axis asks whether attention is centred on affected civilians or on powerful actors. Finally, the Solution versus Victory axis evaluates whether content explicitly encourages positive peace through constructive dialogue and reconciliation, or emphasises outcomes aligned with negative peace, such as ceasefires or “victories” that stop violence without addressing root causes.

However, before we continue, it is worth acknowledging that while this study did not intentionally target either Palestinian or Israeli experiences, most of the videos collected centred on sharing Palestinian perspectives. When trends or observations fall outside this prominent Palestinian framing, they are highlighted to avoid overgeneralisation and to remain attentive to nuance. Overall, as it will be explored in this section, there is a clear advocacy- or justice-oriented tendency among most influencers to foreground Palestinian voices. However, occasional instances where influencers present alternative perspectives are also noted to capture the complexity of how the conflict is covered on TikTok.

4.3.1. Peace Journalism Themes and Patterns

Two codes emerged as particularly consistent within Peace Journalism practices: *Challenging Misinformation and Implicit Bias* (T1) and *Platform to Amplify Marginalised Voices* (PE1). This finding was noteworthy, though not entirely unexpected given existing literature on social media influencers and TikTok's platform affordances. Furthermore, while not a specific code, the Solution-oriented axis was significantly underutilised in the videos. No definitive conclusion can be drawn from this finding. However, the analysis considers factors such as timing, algorithmic dynamics, influencer positioning, and the prioritization of justice-oriented framing over long-term peace strategies.

Challenging Misinformation and Implicit Bias (T1)

Challenging Misinformation and Implicit Bias (T1) is defined as calling attention to potential misinformation, biased reporting, or misleading narratives in mainstream and social media. Ultimately, encouraging critical thinking among its viewers. This was commonly done by challenging dominant narratives, encouraging learning and deep reflection, and addressing implicit biases.

T1.1. Challenging Dominant Narratives

Perhaps one of the key contributions of social media is its ability to challenge the status quo of professional journalism by offering alternative ways of interpreting news and questioning dominant narratives. This aligns with Hanitzsch's argument that journalism is a culturally situated practice, where dominant narratives must be critically questioned rather than accepted as neutral or universal (Hanitzsch, 2007).

Commonly, influencers named specific news outlets and journalists accused of spreading misinformation, suggesting that audiences were being subjected to manipulative or one-sided messaging. In addition, other SMIs on TikTok were also flagged as potentially promoting harmful rhetoric on social media, cautioning against celebrity influence in shaping discourse. Moreover, TikTok's censorship practices were also questioned, among other potential propaganda strategies. For example, an influencer reported that their video was removed after sharing pro-Palestinian content. While TikTok's monitoring practices during the conflict are documented²⁵, this example underscores growing concern about how content moderation may shape narratives and influence which perspectives remain visible to audiences.

In this study, TikTok influencers frequently portrayed mainstream media, government officials, Big Tech platforms, and international institutions as untrustworthy or unreliable. Critiques directed at specific journalists, outlets, political figures, or platforms may shape public trust in traditional news media and governmental communication, reflecting trends discussed in Chapter 2. Such framing may contribute to a broader shift in which institutional messages are increasingly met with scepticism, raising further questions about how truth is constructed and the role influencers play in that process. This is particularly evident when social media influencers themselves caution audiences about the credibility and influence of other influencers.

Although what this theme can suggest is a growing shift towards using social media to challenge how neutrality is defined and practiced in news dissemination. Something that has no doubt already been observed by many. In either case, as consumers of news, it is to recognise that

²⁵ A news statement was released on TikTok official website (2023).

there is always more to a story. Furthermore, it is an invitation remain open to multiple perspectives while also questioning the systems and actors that shape the narratives we consume.

T1.2. Encouraging Deeper Reflection

Another expression of code T1 involved the use of TikTok as a learning space. Influencers guided audiences toward deeper reflection rather than passive consumption of information. Rather than simplifying the situation or focusing solely on current events, several TikTok influencers in this study appeared to encourage critical reflection by introducing theoretical and ideological frameworks, such as colonialism and Zionism. They also recommended further reading from both Palestinian and Israeli authors while acknowledging the limits of their own knowledge and experience. Furthermore, influencers repeatedly focused on raising awareness around language and framing strategies. For instance, by describing the use of terms such as “killed” versus “dead” when speaking of the deaths of Israelis and Palestinians. Similarly, while less common, several videos cautioned against binary framings. For example, portraying conflicts as “good guys” versus “bad guys”.

Overall, this theme suggests that influencers not only challenged dominant narratives but also appeared to encourage deeper learning and reflection. This also directly aligns with Hanitzsch’s argument about fostering the critical motivation needed to engage with the multifaceted nature of narratives, resisting universal, neutral, or binary interpretations. However, what remains unclear is whether these efforts truly encouraged viewers to conduct further research and explore multiple sides of the conflict.

T1.3. Addressing Implicit Bias

Lastly, T1 was also applied to video segments aimed at addressing implicit biases that shaped audience interpretations of the conflict. The first concerned the Bandwagon Effect, which refers to the tendency to adopt prevailing beliefs or behaviours to align with a majority (The Decision Lab, n.d.). In the context of this study, this bias was evident in how audiences accepted dominant narratives that circulated immediately after October 7th. For example, a widely publicized claim alleged that Hamas had beheaded 40 babies, a story that was later disproven despite early reinforcement through political statements, including those attributed to U.S. President Joe Biden. Several influencers noted that audience engagement increased when the claim first circulated, suggesting that early amplification and perceived consensus may contribute to bandwagon effects, allowing unverified information to gain traction before critical scrutiny occurs.

The second implicit bias addressed by was group attribution error, in which the actions or views of a few are taken to represent an entire population. Influencers criticized narratives that equated all Palestinians with Hamas and framed all anti-Zionist positions with antisemitism. Such overgeneralizations contribute to polarization by assigning collective blame and obscuring intra-group diversity. Overall, these efforts aligned with the broader challenge to dominant narratives by encouraging audiences to question trending claims more critically and reflect on the assumptions underlying their judgments of groups and individuals.

Challenging implicit biases is crucial to combatting the human tendency toward overgeneralisation. The media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions and assumptions, often putting people into boxes, thus reinforcing stereotypes. Where this becomes harmful is in how these perceptions are constructed and legitimised through repeated narratives. Before expanding on this later in the thesis, it is important to note that certain forms of communication

can contribute to broader systems that normalise inequality or even harm. Galtung introduces this idea through the concept of cultural violence. Cultural violence refers to language, narratives, or rhetoric that normalize or justify violence, thereby legitimizing both structural and direct violence (Galtung, 1990). While cultural violence will be examined in depth in Chapter 5, it is worth highlighting here how implicit biases shape the stories we accept and reproduce, often without question.

Nonetheless, the core of this code is the recognition that there is more to learn about a conflict, and that information presented through mainstream or social media should not be accepted at face value. In this dataset, influencers have challenged dominant narratives by exposing gatekeeping practices, offering counter-discourses, and encouraging audiences to question linguistic framing and hidden assumptions. Through a CDA lens, these practices highlight how language shapes social understanding, how biases risk normalisation through narrative repetition, and how counter-discourse can disrupt hegemonic meaning-making. Ultimately, T1 suggests that fostering critical media literacy is essential for resisting cultural violence and encouraging more reflexive, multiperspectival engagement with conflict narratives.

Platform to Amplify Marginalised Voices (PE1)

Earlier, we noted that it was unsurprising that the code PE1, *Platform to Amplify Marginalised Voices*, emerged frequently. This finding is largely attributable to how social media has reshaped traditional gatekeeping by enabling marginalised communities to speak directly to global audiences. Ultimately, PE1 is defined by creating conversations around gatekeeping, voice and representation. In the sections that follows, we explore how PE1 was manifested in the data and reflect on issues of inclusivity.

PE1.1. Bearing Witness and Voice

By directly sharing content from affected individuals or recounting their stories, many TikTok influencers in this study sought to create space for voices that have historically lacked visibility. Although this research did not intentionally target either Palestinian or Israeli experiences, most of the videos centred on Palestinian perspectives, a tendency discussed later in this section. Under this code, the external materials embedded in the videos ranged from unfiltered grassroots footage to curated news content and account recommendations, such as *Eye on Palestine*, which directed audiences toward alternative sources of information. Some influencers also incorporated translated clips and personal messages or images from family members, lending a testimonial and human dimension to their content. TikTok's affordances, particularly the ability to embed external materials, enabled audiences to bear witness more directly to the lived experiences of those affected.

This tendency speaks directly to the reshaping of gatekeeping. Professional journalism faces structural, political, and economic pressures that limit its ability to fully participate in the democratic process of news (UNESCO, 2022). Similarly, Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) highlight institutional constraints that restrict the field's capacity to embed Peace Journalism principles in practice. In this context, citizen journalism on social media emerges as a complementary space through which influencers can advance Peace Journalism aims by having marginalised voices heard throughout.

Another way many TikTok influencers filled in the gap was by recounting stories of local heroes. Rather than focusing on elites, such as politicians, diplomats, or celebrities, the emphasis was placed on ordinary people. Such as mothers and first-time mothers, children, healthcare workers, Muslim leaders, and men, reminding viewers of their humanity during armed conflict. At

times, this was done to underscore the human rights issues at stake, highlight acts of liberation and resistance, or simply to cultivate empathy and to witness the invisible effects of the occupation. In this light, PE1 was often complemented with PC6, *Invisible Effects*, and PE3, *Focus on People Peacemakers*, reinforcing the emphasis on human stories and resilience.

PE1.2. A Note on Visibility

As noted earlier, most of the videos in this study centred on Palestinian perspectives. While this provided a platform for communities whose voices have historically been marginalised in mainstream media (Matar, 2025), it also resulted in asymmetrical visibility. Other perspectives, such as those of Israelis, were less present in the dataset. Occasionally, Jewish TikTok influencers reflected on how Zionism and broader socialisation processes may inform Israeli perceptions, often as a way of providing context and avoiding collective blame. However, the absence of such perspectives in this dataset does not necessarily suggest that Israeli voices are uniform or that influencers are intentionally excluding them.

For some, silence in digital spaces can be a strategic choice shaped by fear of backlash, misinterpretation, or social isolation, suggesting that some Israeli narratives may simply be less visible rather than absent (Darawshy et al., 2025). Darawshy and others (2025) highlighted that majority-group members (Jewish-Israelis) felt more able to speak, while minority-group members (Palestinian-Israelis) felt pressure to self-censor. This raises important ethical questions about visibility and vulnerability, particularly regarding how the sharing of someone's story may affect their psychological safety²⁶. From a peace-communication perspective, the ethical task is to foster

²⁶ Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that individuals can express themselves, raise concerns, or share ideas without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or punishment.

spaces where non-violent dialogue is welcomed without pressuring individuals to expose themselves to harm.

Overall, citizen journalism on social media carries a duality. On the one hand, it creates opportunities to bear witness to stories and experiences that may have been overlooked or constrained by traditional news structures. On the other hand, it raises ethical considerations around visibility and vulnerability, particularly concerning who is exposed, who remains silent, and under what conditions. Where these tensions converge with Peace Journalism is in the effort to challenge unequal discursive structures by uplifting marginalised voices, fostering psychological safety, and promoting communicative spaces that humanise all those affected by conflict.

Solution-Oriented Axis

Codes within the Solution-Oriented axis examined whether influencers engaged viewers in peace-focused dialogues and highlighted peace initiatives. In essence, this axis reflects opportunities for positive peace to emerge – peace that goes beyond the cessation of violence to address underlying causes. In contrast, the Victory-Oriented axis in War Journalism aligns more closely with negative peace, which calls for an end to immediate violence but does not necessarily prevent its recurrence.

Although relatively underused, Solution-Oriented codes, tended to appear alongside contextual and human-centred frames such as *Cultural, Political and Historical Framing* (PC2), *Conflict Transformation* (PC4), and *Focus on People Peacemakers* (PE3). When present, this combination framed peace as a holistic transformative process rather than a quick fix conflict.

The relative scarcity of solution-oriented framing may reflect the emotional economies of TikTok following the events in Israel of October 7th, 2023. Coverage in the first month was emotionally charged, with audiences likely seeking urgent updates and outlets for grief or anger. As Roberts and Marchais (2018) suggest, this may reflect a broader tendency in early crisis reporting to focus on highly visible and politically framed violence²⁷. Thus, emphasizing immediate events such as attacks, casualty counts, and official statements rather than nuanced discussions about peace processes or future solutions. TikTok's emphasis on emotionally charged engagement suggests that reflective or solution-oriented content may be less likely to gain visibility and reach. Conversely, some influencers may have avoided this type of framing to prevent being perceived as overly idealistic or detached from the immediacy of the conflict. In other words, audiences immersed in the immediacy of crisis coverage may view calls for dialogue or long-term solutions as premature or minimizing the severity of the events.

Nevertheless, this pattern of low solution-oriented framing, could suggest that social media platforms, often those algorithmically driven, not only determines which narratives circulate, but also which forms of peace emerge. Furthermore, the prevalence of other codes suggests that empathy and compassion for those affected by the conflict were central to influencers' framing. Free from the constraints of official institutions or news outlets, TikTok influencers can challenge norms around how news is produced, distributed, and consumed. Together, *Challenging Misinformation and Implicit Bias* (T1) and *Platform to Amplify Marginalised Voices* (PE1) reflect a justice-oriented approach that seeks to rebalance whose voices are heard and how news is

²⁷ Politically framed violence refers to violent acts interpreted or presented as connected to political actors, goals, or contexts (e.g., state or militant actions, elections, wars, protests).

interpreted. Perhaps, then, the opportunity here is less about mediating conflict or fostering peace dialogues, and more about amplifying justice-oriented framing and holding power to account. In the context of Peace Journalism, while social media may not sustain reflective peace dialogues, it can provide justice driven opportunities, which ultimately can contribute towards positive peace.

Overall, the Peace Journalism framework highlights opportunities for social media influencers to promote empathy, representation, and contextual understanding of a conflict. Yet, within these same spaces, we can observe the risk in communication gravitating towards polarisation, moral absolutes, and blame. Traits closely related to War Journalism. The following section explores emerging patterns and themes within War Journalism on TikTok.

4.3.2. War Journalism Themes and Patterns

In contrast to Peace Journalism, most of the frequently applied War Journalism codes in this study clustered within a single axis. In order of prevalence, *Sensationalism* (WV6), *One-Sided Narratives* (WV3), *Placing Blame* (WV4), and *Zero-Sum Framing* (WV1) were all coded under the War/Violence-Oriented axis. The sole exception was *Give Name to Their Evildoers* (EL2) belonging to the Elite-Oriented axis. The following pages explore emerging patterns and themes within these codes and a synthesis of the dataset to conclude this chapter.

Sensationalism (WV6)

Sensationalism, often associated with journalism practices, involves using language, style, and storytelling to provoke emotional reactions from the consumer of news. In this study, TikTok influencers integrated similar strategies, such as the choice and emphasis on words and framing strategies to convey a message.

First, how certain words were stressed and selected to evoke sensational effect was a common observation. The former took the form of stressing casualty numbers or emphasizing words like “dead”. At other times, the sensational effect stemmed from the choice of words and phrasing itself. Terms such as “killing innocent civilians,” “torturing,” “massacre,” “annihilate,” “slaughtered,” and “bombing/carpet bombing” were used to describe the actions of the Israeli government toward Palestinians, often paired with references to children, mothers, and families. In addition, only two influencers (four videos in total) in this study adopted a defensive stance toward Israel. Their content similarly employed emotionally strong language, focusing on the actions of Hamas toward Israelis and using terms such as “raped,” “brutalised,” “kidnapped,” “slaughtered,” and “tortured”.

Second, beyond the use of emotionally charged words, sensationalism emerged as using comparative framing. As many influencers took a defensive approach in favour of Palestine, comparative framing involved comparing the lived experiences of Palestinians to Israelis. It was done in two distinct ways: choice of terms to describe an event and comparing losses. On one hand, influencers drew on analogical framing, drawing comparisons to other historical atrocities, most notably by depicting Gaza as a “concentration camp,” and, in some instances, as a “death camp”. On the other hand, comparative framing was employed through contrasts in civilian losses. For example, some videos compared casualties, injuries, and material damage across groups, while others juxtaposed Palestinian and Israeli death tolls to highlight disparities in the scale of suffering, often emphasising greater losses among Palestinians. These examples frequently co-occurred with *One-Sided Narrative* (WV3). Nonetheless, a particularly popular illustration that was shown to compare losses was an infographic created by Led By Donkeys, titled *Children killed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from 2000 until today*, which can be accessed [here](#):

<https://countingthekids.org/>. This graphic illustrates yearly child death tolls from 2000 to 2023. By foregrounding the deaths of children, often symbolised as innocent victims, the comparison may function as a framing tactic to elicit empathy and moral concern from viewers.

Finally, another form of sensationalism involved calling out individuals or groups through charged or mocking language, frequently co-occurred with EL2. This included instances where individuals perceived as misinformed or as potentially spreading propaganda were met with emotional criticism or correction. It also included cases in which political leaders were depicted negatively or framed as culpable actors. Specifically, U.S. figures and celebrities were often explicitly named for their positions or silence, while Israeli officials were accused of cruelty or hypocrisy through sarcastic commentary. These statements often relied on strong emotional appeals, exaggeration, or vulgar phrasing, which can amplify outrage and dramatize the contrast between the parties. Consequently, this can further deteriorate the trust between the public and government.

Notably, social media has not dramatically altered Galtung's interpretation of sensationalism in conflict reporting. In both cases, the use of emotive words to define visible effects operates in similar ways, aiming to capture attention and evoke emotional responses. The key addition in the social media environment lies in how algorithms and platform affordances, such as audio and visual editing, amplify these sensational effects. Beyond text on paper, social media platforms introduce a full audio-visual production layer and algorithmic amplification cycle that intensifies emotional impact and reach.

In this instance, sensationalism was used to reinforce broader patterns of imbalance, often magnifying suffering in ways that simplified the conflict into binaries. This tendency provides a

direct entry into the next code, WV3, which further illustrates how influencers constructed these contrasts by privileging one side's perspective over the other.

One-Sided Narratives (WV3)

As the Peace Journalism Model illustrates, *One-Sided Narratives* (WV3) are mutually exclusive to *Inclusive Representation* (PC3). WV3 frames one group as victims while overlooking the suffering of others, rather than centring civilians on both sides. In this study, the majority of TikTok influencers focused primarily on Palestinian suffering. Yet, even among influencers defending Israel, similar one-sided narrative framing was adopted.

Among 'pro-Palestinian' influencers, WV3 often manifested through moralised comparisons that emphasised power asymmetries between Israel and Palestine, such as contrasts in military capacity, casualties, and material destruction. In some cases, the conflict was framed as a genocide in Gaza rather than as a war or conflict, including at moments preceding formal characterisations by international legal bodies²⁸. Through this framing, support for Palestine was frequently positioned as the only morally acceptable stance, while neutrality or expressions of support for Israel were portrayed as complicit or subject to ridicule.

While creating moral binaries is common for War Journalism, what may challenge Galtung's description of WV3 is how justice-oriented framing can complicate binaries. In other words, while the content may appear one-sided, it may stem from a justice-driven motive. This

²⁸ While influencers were already framing the conflict as *genocide* in October–November 2023, international bodies and legal scholars were speaking only of the *risk* of genocide and the need for prevention. For example, UN experts warned on November 2nd that “time is running out to prevent genocide in Gaza” (UN, 2023), and over 240 legal scholars issued a statement on October 18th describing a “serious risk of genocide” (Public Statement, 2023).

framing seeks to draw attention to disproportionate suffering and human rights violations. This may suggest that moral framing can serve advocacy and awareness, not solely polarization.

Altogether, this section underscores how one-sided narratives, regardless of the side being defended, reduce complex realities into simplified moral binaries, seeking to secure alignment with what is portrayed as the “right side of history”. However, it also raises the question of whether there may be purpose in this type of framing. The following code examines another way conflicts are simplified: by placing responsibility.

Placing Blame (WV4) & Give Name to their Evildoer (EL2)

When developing a coding scheme, researchers aim to minimize overlapping codes to avoid redundancy. In this study, the coding scheme was pre-established, and only minor adjustments were made to adapt it to the medium of social media, while preserving the integrity of the axes within the Peace Journalism Model (PJM). However, during analysis, WV4 and EL2, share some similarities worth distinguishing. First, both codes share how responsibility is attributed to individual and groups, which creates some overlap between the two codes. In the original PJM, EL2 offered insight into how opposition groups were demonised while governments/allies were protected. However, within the social media environment, this dynamic shifts considerably. Instead of protecting elites, many influencers and users actively place elites and powerful actors under scrutiny. WV4, on the other hand, retains its traditional focus on framing “the other” as responsible for the conflict. Often by attributing the root causes of violence, escalation, or suffering to a particular side or population. Which is exactly how this code emerged in practice. Most influencers advocating for Palestine attributed blame to Israel and, at times, to colonial powers such as Britain, France, and the United States. By contrast, influencers defending

Israel did not broadly blame Palestinians but instead directed blame specifically toward Hamas, which aligns more closely with EL2 since they frame Hamas as the primary evildoer.

With respect to EL2 and influencers advocating for Palestine often framed the Israeli government as a central actor, emphasising its communication strategies and actions perceived as contributing to Palestinian subjugation. Specific figures such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) are often named, though the IDF is sometimes portrayed as “trained” or “brainwashed” rather than inherently responsible. Responsibility is also extended to colonial powers, particularly the United States and Britain, for providing resources to support Israel. In some cases, Israel was further framed as a vehicle for sustaining broader colonial or white supremacist structures. A small number of influencers suggested that, if Israel did not exist, a similar state would have been created to serve the same function.

While elite actors were explicitly identified as the primary evildoers, they were simultaneously portrayed as the contextual justification of Hamas’s actions on October 7th. That said, holding elites accountable does not, in itself, constitute War Journalism. However, when discourse remains fixed on assigning responsibility and legitimising violence rather than engaging with the underlying conflict, it risks reinforcing defensiveness and polarization. Thereby limiting opportunities for collaborative dialogue that includes all actors. This dynamic can be especially challenging to reconcile when human rights violations are perceived to be at stake. Thus, potentially challenging how EL2 is understood in the Peace Journalism Model. Furthermore, from a CDA perspective, they illustrate how language shapes moral interpretation and narratives of responsibility, including how support for particular sides is articulated, as explored in the next code.

Zero-Sum Framing (WV1)

Sports metaphors are often used to describe competition, strategy, and the drive to win, and an appropriate metaphor to define the code WV1, *Zero-Sum Framing*. For example, let's take the FIFA World Cups as our metaphor. Whether you're someone who follows sports or has little interest in them, imagine cheering on for your team to win during the FIFA finals. This might be the country of your origins, nationality, or simply a team you feel connected to for other reasons. While cheering on for your team and gaining others support, we are simultaneously cheering for the other's defeat, as only one can be triumphant. That is the essence of WV1. It frames the conflict as a sports game where only one triumphs, and the other is defeated. In this instance, the conflict was framed through multiple overlapping dichotomies: Palestine versus Israel, Israelis versus Hamas, Palestinians versus the Israeli government, Palestine versus white supremacy, and ultimately, a broader framing of "us" versus the Israeli government and white supremacy.

No matter which dichotomy chosen, eliciting support and sympathy from viewers appeared to be a central objective. In WV1 terms, this pattern was illustrated through the construction of moral binaries, positioning one side as being on "the right side of history" and the other as morally wrong. Thereby reinforcing legitimacy through the condemnation of the opponent. At other times, and as previously mentioned, this took the form of attacking the opposing group or discrediting those who remained neutral. Particularly individuals who refrained from publicly 'choosing' a side. Beyond the moral arena, the conflict was also framed through competitive language, employing terms such as "winning," "winners and losers," "making early gains," and "victories". From a CDA perspective, this competitive language does not merely describe the conflict but actively shapes how it is understood and evaluated. Consequently, by reducing the conflict to two

opposing parties and a single possible outcome, Zero-Sum Framing aligns closely with Galtung's original interpretation of the concept.

In conclusion, War Journalism tendencies persist on social media but are reshaped by platform affordances and influencer-driven visibility. In particular, TikTok's algorithmic amplification of highly engaged content, combined with influencers' emotional rhetoric, shaped how viewers encountered and interpreted the conflict. Furthermore, moral absolutes were frequently employed to frame the conflict, reinforcing binary divisions and defining only one side as morally justifiable. Although much of this content sought to evoke empathy and raise awareness for Palestinians, it can simultaneously constrain dialogue and limit openness to alternative perspectives. Consequently, potentially silencing voices and ideas that could have otherwise contributed towards solution-oriented dialogues. Nonetheless, moral persuasion raises important questions about its applicability when paired with a justice-oriented lens. As Lawton and Wawa (2025) argue, this balance can be pursued by encouraging journalists to address justice, proportionality, and peace simultaneously. In relation to the PJM, this balance would be difficult to assess using a binary framework. Instead, encouraging a nuance, continuum-based model could be more appropriate. This will be revisited in the last section of this chapter, which brings together insights from both parts of the research question into a cohesive synthesis.

4.3.3. Concluding Observations

In Chapter 2, we explored how media operate as extensions of ourselves, influencing not only how we perceive reality but also how we participate in it. Within this framework, social media influencers (SMIs), as modern opinion leaders, amplify this effect by shaping collective perceptions and conversations online. This study offers insight into how social media and SMIs function as extensions that can shape international conflict discourse. Notably by creating

opportunities to challenge dominant narratives, amplify marginalised voices, and reframe notions of accountability. In the same vein, TikTok's platform affordances can escalate how such messaging is both produced and received. Often enhancing sensational effects to convey messages rooted in justice and advocacy for traditionally marginalised communities.

Justice-driven framing was a defining feature of this study, as TikTok influencers in both Peace and War Journalism contexts often used their platforms to advocate for Palestinians. Moral persuasion was commonly employed to frame support for one side as the ethical or humane choice. Traditionally, the PJM discourages journalists from constructing binaries between affected communities, such as framing one as "good" and the other as "bad." However, it does not fully account for the nuances of moral advocacy within justice-oriented reporting, where taking a stance may be seen not as a breach of neutrality, but as an ethical responsibility. Lawton and Wawa (2025) expand on this idea, illustrating how the Peace Journalism Model, when combined with and the Just War Theory, can accommodate such ethical engagement while maintaining its commitment to nonviolence. Nonetheless, justice-oriented content and moral persuasion on TikTok present an intriguing application of the PJM, suggesting that a continuum-based framework may better capture its nuances.

The synthesis of this study's findings will proceed to capture how these patterns collectively shape the way conflict is communicated within TikTok's social media environment.

4.4. Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, these findings examine how TikTok influencers applied the Peace Journalism Model when covering the Palestinian- Israeli conflict between October 7 and November 7, 2023. They also explored whether violence-inciting content attracted greater

audience engagement. Although this study did not find a significant correlation showing that War/Violence-oriented content consistently received higher engagement than Peace/Conflict-oriented content, the results draw attention to how and why certain videos gain traction on social media. For instance, contextual factors, including the timing of the content and the socio-emotional climate, may help explain why a Peace Journalism-dominant video received the highest engagement rating among all 60 videos in the dataset.

Across both Peace Journalism and War Journalism orientations, a common theme emerged. Influencers frequently used justice-focused framing and critically questioned dominant narratives, especially those that did not address the power dynamics at play in the conflict. This often involved calling for accountability among elites, amplifying the voices of marginalised communities, and bearing witness to lived experiences. However, this was also commonly communicated using sensational language and moral absolutes, which tended to reinforce an “us versus them” dynamic and contributed to polarisation rather than peace-oriented dialogue.

Furthermore, the application of the PJM within social media raised important questions concerning how peace-oriented communication is shaped by platform environments. Even if influencers had good intentions to humanise affected communities and advocate for accountability, these messages existed within a communicative space that privileges emotional intensity, immediacy, and moral clarity. As a result, peace-oriented elements often appeared alongside War Journalism framing, rather than in place of it. This observation invites consideration of the PJM as a continuum, as reflected in the orientation scores of this study, rather than a fixed binary model. Such an approach shifts the focus from categorising content as either Peace Journalism or War Journalism to examining the degree and direction of its discursive orientation, and why such tendencies emerge.

To continue, Chapter 5 will build on these findings by integrating additional theoretical perspectives to further interpret and contextualise the observed patterns. Specifically, it examines the presence of moral absolutes, the dehumanisation of the “other,” and instances of positive peace within the dataset. When considered in isolation, these elements may offer only a partial understanding of the broader implications of influencer-driven content and its relevance to social responsibility. Accordingly, Chapter 5 explores interpretive pathways that deepen this analysis. On one hand, it examines how moral absolutes and processes of dehumanisation may contribute to cycles of violence, both through framing choices and linguistic constructions. This discussion is guided by Johan Galtung’s *Cultural Violence* (1969;1990) and Pierre Bourdieu’s *Symbolic Violence* (1991). On the other hand, Chapter 5 identifies opportunities for positive peace by highlighting thematic patterns within the dataset and situating them within broader conceptual frameworks. In particular it draws on Gerhard Reese’s *Common Human Identity* (2015) and Courtney Lawton and Brenda Wawa’s emerging *Just-Peace Journalism* (2025). Together, these perspectives aim to provide a balanced understanding by highlighting both the potential harms present in certain communication practices and the possibilities they hold for fostering peace communication and shared humanity.

This chapter will also discuss the implications of these findings on a few levels. These include the ethical responsibilities of content creators, the importance of critical reflection for viewers and consumers, and the scholarship contributions towards modern peace communications. The chapter will conclude by outlining this study’s contributions to peace communication research, particularly in relation to social media environments, as well as its contributions to the broader field of conflict studies. It will also offer questions to support and inspire future research in this area.

CHAPTER 5: THEORETICAL INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the previous chapter, this study's hypothesis and research questions were addressed and the findings were synthesized. Building on these results, this chapter offers theoretical interpretations of the opportunities and challenges shaping the production and consumption of news and conflict-related content. For this, we will be referring to Johan Galtung's *Cultural Violence* (1969 and 1990), Pierre Bourdieu's *Symbolic Violence* (1991), Gerhard Reese's *Common Human Identity* (2015), and Courtney Lawton and Brenda Wawa's emerging *Just-Peace Journalism* (2025). The chapter then turns to the practical implications of these findings for content creators, audiences, and researchers working within social media environments. Finally, it concludes by outlining recommendations for future research.

5.1. Theoretical Interpretations

Before considering the theoretical interpretations of this study's findings, it is useful to return briefly to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message". This is to establish the foundation for this discussion. Fundamentally, both perspectives are concerned with meaning-making. CDA focuses on how language constructs meaning, power, and legitimacy within discourse (Fairclough, 2010). In contrast, McLuhan's perspective draws attention to how the design and affordances of a medium shape the form and reception of a message. Sometimes as much as, or more than, its explicit content.

Together, these approaches offer complementary insights into this study's dataset: CDA helps us understand what possible meanings are constructed through linguistic choices within TikTok videos. While McLuhan encourages us to consider how TikTok as a platform influences the production, circulation, and interpretation of those meanings. With this foundation, the

discussion turns to how the findings may relate to broader social dynamics. First, Johan Galtung's *Cultural Violence* and Pierre Bourdieu's *Symbolic Violence* provide diagnostic lenses for examining cycles of violence. Next, Gerhard Reese's *Common Human Identity* and Lawton and Wawa's emerging *Just-Peace Journalism* offer a more generative perspective. These frameworks enable an interpretive examination of the narratives observed in the dataset. They help assess how such narratives may reinforce, challenge, or reimagine understandings of conflict, without making claims about direct audience effects.

5.1.1. Johan Galtung's Cultural Violence

Within the context of this study, cultural violence refers to how narratives and media representations justify or legitimize the use of violence. Therefore, how events are captured and reported can either reinforce or challenge cultural violence. Practically, War Journalism (WJ) is a tool that can reinforce cultural violence by dehumanising groups, glorifying retaliation and armed resistance, normalising suffering, or framing conflicts as ancient and unresolvable. In general, cultural violence is situated in a 3-part violence cycle conceptualized by Johan Galtung (1969) alongside structural and direct violence. For instance, cultural violence can shape public beliefs and ideologies that, over time, become embedded in institutions and policies. Thus giving rise to structural violence, where systemic inequalities and social hierarchies limit access to safety, dignity, and opportunity (Galtung, 1990). In turn, this structural violence creates the conditions that make direct violence, visible acts of violence such as killing, maiming, desocialization, or repression²⁹, appear inevitable or even justified. Hence, completing the cycle that sustains conflict.

²⁹ Johan Galtung describes 4 types of direct violence when the following needs are negated: survival, well-being, identity, and freedom (1990, p.292).

Peace Journalism (PJ) challenges this cycle by promoting elements of positive peace and expanding our understanding of the conflict.

From the findings, two themes stand out that risk reinforcing cultural violence within the context of sharing events from the Palestinian–Israeli conflict on social media. Which are the use of moral absolutes or justifications to elicit support for one side, and the dehumanisation of the other. By constructing moral absolutes (right vs. wrong) and portraying one side as less human (good vs. evil, humane vs. inhumane), discourse can indirectly imply that empathy is warranted only for certain groups. And, extending empathy toward the other side may, in turn, be perceived as endorsing its actions. Within social media environments, this dynamic can manifest through forms of social sanctioning, such as being labelled “controversial” or “cancelled³⁰”. Depending on the prevailing narrative or perceived moral consensus (e.g., whose account of events is accepted as truth). In this sense, social sanctioning can be interpreted as a form of direct violence (Galtung, 1990). This reluctance may be partly attributed to a perceived risk to one’s social identity or sense of belonging within digital communities.

Paradoxically, while challenging dominant narratives emerged as a recurring theme in the findings, some influencers appeared to do so by reproducing similar binary framings to those they critiqued. Thereby inadvertently sustaining elements of cultural violence within their own narratives.

³⁰ Being ‘canceled’ refers to the social-media phenomenon in which individuals are publicly held to account—or penalised—by large online communities for perceived offensive behaviour, resulting in reputational damage or exclusion (Vogels et al. 2021).

This cycle suggests that when individuals avoid adopting humanising or multidimensional perspectives out of fear of social backlash, polarisation persists. As a result, moral opposition and exclusionary attitudes are more likely to continue in online spaces. In turn, this perpetuation of divisive narratives can extend beyond discourse and become embedded in representational practices. Hence, signalling a transition from cultural to symbolic violence, where inequalities and social hierarchies may be present in language.

5.1.2. Pierre Bourdieu's Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence, much like cultural violence, often operates beneath our awareness, shaping how we interpret and engage with the world without us realising it. Specifically, symbolic violence investigates how inequalities and social hierarchies are shaped by hidden power dynamics. Often by means of symbols, language, and meaning (Bourdieu, 1991). Moreover, cultural capital or social capital, in Bourdieu's terms, refers to the knowledge, tastes, and dispositions that are valued within a society (Bourdieu, 1986). These shared values help shape which perceptions and behaviours become widely accepted. As discussed in Chapter 2, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) possess significant social capital, positioning them to shape how audiences interpret and respond to events.

This influence becomes particularly evident in the framing of conflict, where portrayals of those involved can shape how audiences perceive and respond to represented groups or their supporters. For example, narratives that construct moral absolutes and dehumanise opposing sides may implicitly establish a hierarchy of empathy. This can signal who is deemed deserving of compassion and who is not. This hierarchy becomes visible in whose suffering is recognised, validated, and believed. The risk with symbolic violence is that individuals may not consciously

agree with the dominant framing. Yet, may still internalise it, potentially contributing to forms of lateral violence within and between communities.

While cultural violence manifests through moral narratives that justify social exclusion, symbolic violence operates through everyday language that shapes who is seen as worthy of empathy. In the dataset, both often co-exist: emotional rhetoric exposes injustice but simultaneously risks reproducing moral binaries that legitimise hostility. This dynamic underscores how influencers, while challenging dominant narratives, may unconsciously reproduce the same moral hierarchies and frames that sustain cycles of violence.

While Galtung's and Bourdieu's frameworks help diagnose these dynamics, the following theories shift toward identifying opportunities to foster the conditions for positive peace.

5.1.3. Gerhard Reese's Common Human Identity

Gerhard Reese's concept of Common Human Identity (CHI) suggests that identifying with a broader, global human community may increase individuals' motivation to act for the collective good. Reese refers to this process as the formation of a superordinate identity. Reese (2015) further argues that CHI can strengthen supportive behaviours toward civil rights movements (social, environmental, and human rights), promote contributions to global well-being, and encourage action against global inequalities.

At the same time, an ethical limitation emerges. Defining what constitutes the "good" for others is complex and risks imposing a single worldview on diverse communities. Nevertheless, the Peace Journalism Model (PJM) remains relevant. By encouraging nuance, empathy, and attention to human needs across conflict lines, PJM may help foster elements of a superordinate identity, even without a single, shared definition of what is "good."

In this study, uplifting the lived experiences and stories of those directly impacted by the conflict, particularly individuals from marginalised communities, may represent a small yet meaningful step toward fostering a CHI. This is especially evident when such narratives are paired with justice-oriented framing. By centring universal human needs such as safety, dignity, empathy, and survival, this approach may support elements of CHI. However, the risk of creating moral binaries or relying on emotionally charged language remains significant. Such framing may foster solidarity with one group while unintentionally distancing or dehumanising another. This tension highlights how justice-driven strategies that motivate collective action may also constrain the development of a shared and inclusive global identity, which CHI seeks to promote.

Nonetheless, the presence of Peace Journalism elements across the dataset may indicate potential pathways for cultivating a broader sense of common humanity. These elements include contextualising the conflict, questioning power dynamics, and sharing lived experiences. Even when Peace Journalism and justice-oriented framing coexisted with War Journalism elements, such openings may still allow audiences to recognise interconnectedness and to humanise those affected by conflict.

The final theory explored in this chapter examines the paradox of using moral justification and justice-oriented framing when reporting on international conflicts. One that draws on both Peace Journalism and Just War theory. This perspective offers a more recent theoretical development that aligns closely with the objectives of this research.

5.1.4. Courtney Lawton and Brenda Wawa's emerging Just-Peace Journalism

Similar to the findings of this study, Courtney Lawton and Brenda Wawa emphasise how social media has reshaped conflict reporting. Particularly by amplifying ethical dilemmas tied to

“the rapid spread of unverified information and the competition for clicks, which can reinforce sensationalist or crisis-focused content” (2025, p. 671). In response to these challenges, they developed the Just-Peace Journalism (JPJ) framework. The JPJ merges Peace Journalism with Just War Theory and offers a way to understand how justice-driven advocacy can coexist with peace-oriented communication.

The dataset in this study showed that TikTok influencers frequently engaged in moral persuasion, highlighted injustices, and amplified marginalised voices. Such practices align with key principles of Just-Peace Journalism, particularly the emphasis on naming harm and pursuing justice with integrity. At the same time, JPJ warns against moral absolutes and binary framings that reinforce hostility. A tension evident in the recurring use of sensational language and “us versus them” narratives within this dataset. JPJ suggests that conflict reporting can bring moral clarity rather than moral outrage by:

- Naming actions and explaining their significance rather than using antagonistic framing;
- Pairing accountability with pathways toward peace (e.g., emphasising nonviolent outcomes, protections, or solutions);
- Humanising all sides while still naming injustices;
- Using proportional rather than extreme language;
- Contextualising harm without using it to justify retaliation; and
- Transforming emotional storytelling into empathetic solidarity that fosters connection without inflaming hatred.

(Lawton & Wawa, 2025)

Taken together, JPJ complements the Peace Journalism Model by addressing a gap: that conflict reporting on social media requires not only harm-reduction but also a form of ethically grounded, justice-sensitive peace communication. The goal shifts from being “objective” to being impartially oriented toward humanity and social responsibility. Although JPJ was not developed

with citizen journalism in mind, its principles remain highly relevant for interpreting the communication practices observed in this study.

Overall, reviewing this study's findings through additional interpretive lenses provides a fuller and more nuanced understanding of how SMIs cover international conflicts. Galtung's concept of cultural violence and Bourdieu's symbolic violence helped illuminate the risks embedded in language and framing. Notably the use of moral binaries to mobilize support for one side. Such binaries, whether intentional or not, can marginalise those seeking to humanize all sides and those who belong to groups positioned as the "other." In doing so, linguistic choices may reinforce social moral hierarchies and contribute to a more hostile communicative environment.

Conversely, Reese's Common Human Identity and Lawton and Wawa's Just-Peace Journalism offer frameworks that emphasize shared humanity and morally grounded engagement. Together, they extend the Peace Journalism Model by demonstrating how conflict reporting can honour dignity, accountability, and reconciliation rather than deepen divisions.

The next section turns to the practical implications of these findings for content creators and consumers, the primary audiences of this study, followed by a brief discussion of the academic contributions this research offers.

5.2. Implications

Throughout this study, two primary groups have been consistently explicitly focused on: social media influencers (or content creators more broadly) and the audience (consumers). This aligns with the research objectives of this study, which sought both to raise awareness around critical media literacy and to examine the extent of PJ elements. Thus, many of this study's findings speak directly to these two groups. At the same time, this research offers unique contributions to

academic conversations within social media peace communication and conflict studies. The following section explores how this study may inform these different groups and sectors.

5.2.1. Content Creator Implications: Social and Ethical Responsibility

Within the literature review, this study examined how social media influencers (SMIs) shape public opinion, discourse, and behaviour across diverse topics. Initially developed as an entertainment platform, TikTok³¹ has evolved into a central source of news and information. As the platform expanded, SMIs gained increased visibility, credibility, and reach, positioning them as modern opinion leaders. The literature further suggests that SMIs function as alternative sources of information, particularly in contexts marked by public distrust toward official institutions. As observed in this study, influencers may further shape this distrust by critiquing government actors, Big Tech companies, and mainstream media through their rhetorical choices and narrative framing. This pattern points to a possible countervailing dynamic in which declining trust in institutional authorities coincides with the growing legitimacy attributed to SMIs as information sources. More broadly, as the need for information and clarity persists amid shifting news consumption practices, content creators assume increasing social and ethical responsibilities.

Within this study's context, as content creators, you hold significant responsibility in how conflicts are framed and communicated online. The Peace Journalism Model (PJM) offers a way to approach conflict in a manner that places our shared humanity at the forefront. At the same time, this study recognises gaps in the PJM, particularly its limited guidance on how to address accountability and justice without slipping into moral absolutism. Because PJM is built on a binary

³¹ While TikTok serves as the primary empirical focus, these dynamics are not platform-specific and reflect broader shifts across social media environments.

orientation, it can overlook the nuance needed in today's social media environment. The Just-Peace Journalism (JPJ) framework helps bridge this gap by integrating ethics, moral reasoning, and justice-seeking. In doing so, it avoids treating groups' needs and goals as inherently incompatible. This includes critiquing official institutions in ways that incorporate them into solution-focused deliberation.

Similarly, when challenging dominant narratives, it is important to remain attentive to the risk of reproducing new ones. This concern aligns with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. Reflecting on whether content unintentionally reinforces stereotypes, erases groups, or centres one experience at the expense of another becomes part of the ethical responsibility of modern communicators.

One of the videos in this study, which had the highest engagement and one of the strongest Peace Journalism scores, did exactly that. It highlighted how Palestinian men are often erased from broader narratives or portrayed solely through the lens of terrorism. By drawing attention to this omission, the creator offered viewers a different perspective, potentially encouraging more critical reflection and creating space for voices that might otherwise go unheard. This type of framing helps humanise all sides of a conflict and normalises discussions that are often absent from mainstream coverage.

Ultimately, people on all sides seek to have their needs met, protection, dignity, safety, justice, accountability, or security. Focusing on visible effects or direct violence from conflict should not become a distraction from understanding those needs or from fostering reconciliation-oriented, solution-focused dialogue. As influencers, you play a powerful role in shaping these conversations. Use that influence to create space for thoughtful, ethical, and inclusive discussions.

And, remain mindful of the temptation toward sensationalism, which may draw attention but can also deepen division.

As a closing thought, I encourage you to consider your own values and how they show up, shift, or feel tested when you produce content.

5.2.2. Consumer Implications: Critical Media Literacy & Reflection

In the introductory chapter, Section 1.3 - *Walk the Talk: Reader's Self-Reflection as the Basis of this Study*, encouraged readers to reflect on how lived experiences through intersectionality and positionality shape how we take in the world around us. Although the present implications are directed toward consumers of social media content, the core message from that earlier section remains relevant. It emphasizes the importance of cultivating critical awareness through media literacy and reflective engagement when encountering mediated accounts of conflict. These skills involve looking beyond the narrative presented, considering how it is constructed, and assessing how it influences our own perceptions and responses.

To illustrate, consider a situation in which a social media influencer you follow discusses a violent incident occurring in a country in Africa. You may have encountered similar reports from other creators. However, when an account comes from someone whose content you regularly trust, the narrative may be accepted with less scrutiny. This study invites consumers to pause and acknowledge that instinctive reaction. From there, reflection may involve attending to the emotions the content evokes and examining how the conflict is framed. This includes considering whether the creator emphasises accountability or relies on blame, and how moral justifications are used to foster shared humanity or reinforce division.

It is also important to recognise the role of algorithms in shaping information environments. As engagement increases, similar videos may be amplified, producing an echo chamber. In such contexts, asking whether multiple creators, including influencers, journalists, and organisations, are reproducing the same narrative becomes essential. Questions such as whether creators draw on diverse sources, whether they include voices from affected communities, and whose perspectives are absent can support a more balanced understanding. Exclusion may stem from a range of factors, including safety concerns, platform dynamics, or fear of social backlash.

Finally, when content creators themselves invoke the importance of bias awareness or critical judgment, as many did in this study, this can serve as a reminder to re-engage our own skills in media literacy and reflection. These capacities develop through consistent practice; like any skill, they become stronger, more accessible, and more intuitive the more they are used.

As the beginning or continuation of building these skills, I invite you to reflect on this prompt: How can we contribute to an online environment that supports diverse perspectives without reinforcing dynamics of retaliation or exclusion?

5.2.3. Academic Implications: Modernizing Peace Journalism for Digital Media

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a growing body of peer-reviewed research has examined how social media shapes public discourse surrounding international conflicts. Within this literature, several studies, much like the present research, focus specifically on the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in disseminating conflict-related information to mass audiences. Across these works, recurring areas of inquiry include algorithmic visibility, virality dynamics, and the ethical responsibilities associated with high-reach communication.

Despite these emerging contributions, the phenomenon of SMIs in conflict communication remains underexplored, especially in relation to peace-oriented frameworks. This study offers two significant and distinctive contributions to peace communication research. First, it advances peace research within contemporary social media ecologies by examining how conflict-related narratives are constructed, circulated, and potentially received within platform-specific dynamics. Specifically in applying the Peace Journalism Model as a coding framework to analyse social media content and using a multi-step sampling approach to minimize biases from platform affordances. Second, it proposes an updated, continuum-based approach to the PJM. One that aligns more closely with the hybrid, layered, and highly participatory nature of social media environments. These contributions help modernize peace communication scholarship and provide a more sensitive analytical lens for studying social media-age conflict reporting.

This study employed a mixed-method design combining qualitative framing analysis, discourse analysis, and engagement metrics. This approach offers methodological pathways for researchers examining conflict communication in influencer-driven social media. A key contribution lies in the effort to capture nuances within creator-produced content, addressing a common limitation in the binary application of the Peace Journalism Model. By adapting the PJM into a continuum-based approach and assessing Peace and War Journalism tendencies through orientation scores, this study acknowledges that both orientations can co-exist within a single piece of content. Rather than labelling videos as strictly “PJ” or “WJ,” the analysis instead examined how each tendency manifests, what elements they share, and what underlying drivers may encourage more peace-oriented forms of communication.

In addition, by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, this research expands how PJ findings can be interpreted. These frameworks help illustrate how patterns observed in influencer

content may surface within broader social dynamics. This interpretive layer is rarely incorporated in applications of the Peace Journalism Model and therefore represents a distinctive contribution of this project.

In other words, this study examines how Peace Journalism emerges within influencer content related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, while also considering the broader societal implications of these frames. The focus is not on individuals within conflict zones, but on diaspora communities, Western and European contexts, and global social media users whose perceptions are shaped by online narratives. Beyond empirical analysis, this research therefore seeks to foster critical reflection, an approach that remains limited within peace communication scholarship and constitutes one of the study's distinctive contributions.

The following section concludes this paper. Building on the implications outlined above, it turns to recommendations for future research and reflects on how this study contributes to strengthening a common human identity.

5.3. Future Research and Final Remarks

Overall, this study examined the presence and expression of Peace Journalism within social media by analysing content from 30 TikTok influencers covering the Palestinian-Israeli conflict between October 7 and November 7, 2023. Rooted in an ethical and social responsibility to understand the narratives we produce, reproduce, and consume, this research offers a foundational contribution to peace communication. In particular, it does so by integrating the Peace Journalism Model with Critical Discourse Analysis to identify patterns of Peace Journalism and examining engagement metrics on TikTok. This approach also explored whether violence-embedded content attracts higher levels of interaction. Although no significant correlation emerged, likely due to

methodological limitations and algorithmic influences, the findings suggest that TikTok may offer opportunities for collaboration, dialogue, visibility, and representation. At the same time, the platform also carries risks, including heightened emotional rhetoric, polarisation, and the reinforcement of dominant narratives shaped by platform dynamics. Together, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Peace and War Journalism tendencies within influencer-driven content on TikTok. Beyond descriptive insights, this study advances conceptual reflection and offers practical relevance for media literacy and peace communication efforts.

Future research could deepen this work by examining propaganda strategies with greater nuance, integrating visual content analysis, and exploring how Peace Journalism might ethically balance responsibility, reconciliation, and influence within digital environments. Given this study's grounding in technological determinism and McLuhan's media theory, further inquiry into how influencer-driven content shapes public understandings of international conflict would be particularly valuable. While this study gestures toward such effects, it does not seek to measure them directly.

Nevertheless, I feel it is fitting to end this paper on a personal note, as this study is, at its heart, about the human element. It is about how we are touched, moved, and influenced by the stories we encounter online. For cultures where social media is woven into daily life (as is the case for myself, a mid-20-something firmly embedded in this social media environment), my motivation for conducting this research stems from a desire to humanize social media spaces. We often invest significant emotional energy in consuming content. At times, we may not fully recognize the extent to which it shapes, and sometimes divides, our relationships and communities. In my own experience, I witnessed how online news and information created divides within

families. These divides reached a point where certain topics became sources of tension and were avoided altogether in the name of keeping the “peace.”

This experience likely introduced biases throughout my research. Yet, I was encouraged to find unexpected threads of compassion and empathy within the dataset, signals of hope for what social media could be. As this study suggests, with ongoing intentionality, reflecting on how we humanize both the content and the people involved, and examining whether what we share divides or connects, we take meaningful steps toward cultivating a shared sense of humanity. In this way, the findings of this study not only illuminate how Peace Journalism emerges within social media environments. They also emphasise responsibility and potential to promote more humane, reflective, and justice-conscious media cultures.

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