

AI-Generated Persuasion in Conflict: A Study of Israeli Influencers' Perspective

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Abstract: Generative artificial intelligence is increasingly embedded in social media production and circulation, creating new opportunities for persuasive communication while also intensifying concerns about authenticity, manipulation, and misinformation during conflict. This qualitative study draws on semi-structured interviews with eight Israeli social media influencers from different content domains who posted war-related content in the first months of the Israel-Gaza war. Across interviews, AI was framed as an amplifier of emotion, narrative clarity, and virality, but also as a tool that can blur the boundary between persuasion and propaganda. Ethical evaluations were frequently shaped by political alignment, and almost all participants supported stronger transparency-oriented safeguards such as labeling or watermarking, even while questioning their feasibility. The findings position influencers as emerging gatekeepers in conflict communication and illustrate how AI intensifies both expressive capacity and credibility dilemmas. Given the small, context-specific sample and the reliance on self-reported accounts, the study offers exploratory rather than generalizable conclusions, and points to the need for further comparative research and governance frameworks that combine platform accountability with public media literacy.

Keywords: Generative AI, Social Media, Influencers, Conflict, Narrative, Propaganda, Persuasion.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have become central infrastructures for persuasive discourse, public debate, and information exchange during periods of conflict. Their speed, accessibility, and interactive affordances allow users to circulate content in real time, often outside the editorial routines associated with legacy media. These affordances can broaden participation and visibility, but they can also accelerate the circulation of unverified claims, emotionally charged narratives, and strategically misleading content (Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024; Reuter et al., 2025).

These tensions become more acute when conflict-related communication is produced or enhanced through generative artificial intelligence. Contemporary AI tools can generate text, images, audio, and video that appear credible or emotionally compelling even when they are synthetic. In politically polarized environments, such content may intensify uncertainty, manipulate affect, and complicate the distinction between documentation, illustration, and fabrication (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

On Saturday, October 7, 2023, Hamas (The Islamic Resistance Movement, the governing body in the Gaza Strip) launched a large-scale surprise attack on Israel, combining massive rocket fire with land infiltration. Over 1200 Israelis were killed and 253 civilians and soldiers were taken hostage. On the following day, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah opened another front against Israel in the north. Israel had retaliated severely in Gaza and later in Lebanon as well. The war that began in the wake of the October 7th events between the State of Israel and its neighbors continues to exact a heavy toll on all sides, as of the time of writing this paper.

As with previous cycles of violence, social media has immediately become a central space for heated debates, dissemination of narratives and persuasion efforts by influencers and ordinary users on both sides of the conflict (Khamis and Dogbatse, 2024; Nasereddin, 2023). Unlike previous conflicts, content creators had novel AI tools at their disposal, capable of producing immersive or deeply emotional narratives. For instance, deepfake videos of hostages, fabricated images of children in the rubble, and other synthetic media surfaced—some labeled as artificial, others not. This phenomenon raises questions about authenticity: while AI may bolster creativity and narrative efficacy, it also poses ethical dilemmas regarding the credibility of visuals and text, as well as the moral responsibilities of those who produce them (Vaccari and Chadwick, 2020; Romanishyn et al, 2025).

This study is informed by three complementary lines of scholarship: opinion leadership research, which highlights the role of influencers in shaping attention and trust (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Harff et al., 2025); research on affective persuasion, which explains how emotionally resonant content can structure interpretation and mobilization (McDonnell et al., 2017; Wolf and Schröder, 2024); and work on information warfare, which conceptualizes online conflict communication as a struggle over framing, legitimacy, and narrative dominance

(Prier, 2020; Reuter et al., 2025). Together, these perspectives help interpret influencers not merely as content creators, but as consequential mediators of conflict-related meaning in networked environments.

Despite a growing literature on misinformation, deepfakes, and AI governance, less is known about how influencers themselves understand and negotiate the use of AI in conflict communication. Existing research has focused largely on the effects of synthetic media, platform dynamics, or institutional responses. Far fewer studies examine the practical reasoning of creators who decide whether, when, and how to use AI when speaking to large audiences during war. Addressing that gap, the present study explores how Israeli influencers perceive AI-generated persuasion, what boundaries they draw between legitimate advocacy and manipulation, how they assess audience vulnerability, and what forms of regulation they regard as desirable or realistic.

1.1 Research Questions

RQ1. To what extent did participants use AI-based tools such as text generation, image editing, or video creation when producing war-related persuasive content?

RQ2. How did participants distinguish between legitimate persuasion, propaganda, and manipulative disinformation in relation to AI-generated content?

RQ3. How did participants perceive the emotional and interpretive effects of AI-generated war-related content on audiences?

RQ4. What regulatory or platform-level responses did participants consider appropriate or feasible?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Influencers and Opinion Leadership

In platformized communication environments, influencers have become visible intermediaries between information sources and publics. Their influence is often rooted in perceived accessibility, authenticity, and sustained interaction with followers. In this respect, influencers may function as contemporary opinion leaders, especially for younger audiences who encounter content of public affairs through platform-native communicators rather than traditional news organizations (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Harff et al., 2025). This shift does not simply replace journalism, but it redistributes authority. As gatekeeping becomes more decentralized, highly visible communicators without formal editorial norms can play a growing role in the circulation, framing, and legitimization of public narratives (Casero-Ripollés, 2021; Hurcombe, 2024). Recent survey data similarly indicate that social media and news influencers have become meaningful sources of public affairs information for many users, particularly younger adults (Pew Research Center, 2024a, 2024b).

2.2 Synthetic Media and AI-Enabled Persuasion

Generative AI tools substantially lower the cost and effort required to produce persuasive media. They can support drafting, editing, visual enhancement, and the creation of entirely synthetic materials, thereby expanding communicative capacity at scale (Dwivedi et al., 2023). In advertising and political communication, this capacity is significant because it enables rapid personalization, stylistic consistency, and emotionally calibrated messaging.

Yet the persuasive affordances of AI are inseparable from questions of authenticity. Synthetic images and videos may be received as documentary or testimonial even when they are illustrative, speculative, or fabricated. Research on deepfakes and synthetic political media suggests that AI-generated content can undermine trust, increase uncertainty, and complicate audiences' judgments about what is real, manipulated, or strategically edited (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). From a communication perspective, AI is therefore not only a production technology but also a rhetorical one. It can sharpen framing, dramatize suffering, intensify emotional cues, and make narratives more memorable. These affordances are particularly consequential when creators seek to influence audiences under conditions of moral urgency, identity conflict, and high information overload.

2.3 Social Media in Conflict and Information Warfare

Conflict communication on social media unfolds in environments characterized by speed, asymmetry, strategic framing, and emotional escalation. Platforms function not only as channels of reporting or testimony, but also

as contested spaces in which state and non-state actors seek to define legitimacy, victimhood, threat, and responsibility (Prier, 2020; Reuters et al., 2025; Zeitzoff, 2017).

This dynamic is frequently discussed through the lens of information warfare, which emphasizes attempts to shape interpretation, morale, and political positioning through the circulation of strategic narratives. The visibility and velocity of social platforms make them especially hospitable to misinformation, selective framing, and viral emotional content, particularly when algorithmic ranking systems reward engagement rather than evidentiary quality (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Research also shows that filter bubbles, echo chambers, and selective exposure can reinforce prior commitments and reduce the likelihood that users encounter or accept disconfirming information (Ross-Arguedas et al., 2022; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In this context, the communicative choices of influencers matter not only because they attract attention, but because they can normalize particular standards of evidence, authenticity, and moral judgment.

2.4 Governance, Ethics, and Regulation

Debates about AI governance commonly emphasize transparency, accountability, fairness, and the mitigation of harmful bias (Corrêa et al., 2023; Hagendorff, 2020). These principles are particularly relevant in conflict communication, where synthetic media may exploit grief, fear, anger, and vulnerability while obscuring the boundary between documentation and fabrication.

Regulatory initiatives such as the European Union AI Act reflect growing institutional concern, but implementation challenges remain substantial. Technical detection is imperfect, platform governance is uneven, and the pace of innovation often exceeds the speed of policy development (European Union, 2024; Walter, 2024). In practice, debates continue over whether labeling, watermarking, moderation, or media-literacy interventions can reduce harm without oversimplifying the ethical complexity of synthetic content.

These tensions point to the need for empirical work that examines how visible communicators themselves understand responsibility, legitimacy, and regulation in relation to AI-generated persuasion. That need is especially acute in conflict settings, where normative judgments are often entangled with political alignment and emotional identification.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with eight Israeli social media influencers between the ages of 24 and 36. Participants were selected purposively in order to include public-facing creators from diverse domains, including beauty, travel, entertainment, fitness, environmental advocacy, and independent journalism, all of whom posted content related to the war after October 7, 2023.

Interviews were conducted during the first months following October 7, 2023 via phone or video calls and lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes. The interview protocol covered four main areas: participants' content practices before and after the outbreak of war; familiarity with and use of AI tools for text, image, or video production; views on authenticity, manipulation, and moral boundaries; and perceptions of regulation, platform responsibility, and future developments.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and anonymized. Interviews were conducted in Hebrew, and quotations were translated into English for publication and lightly edited for readability while preserving meaning. Given the topic sensitivity and the public visibility of the participants, identifying details were removed and participants are cited anonymously.

The material was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Butcher et al, 2001; Luborsky, 1994). The authors and research assistants read the transcripts repeatedly, developed initial descriptive codes, compared interpretations, and iteratively grouped related codes into broader themes. The analysis aimed to identify both recurring patterns and meaningful divergences across participants. Because the study is exploratory and based on a small, context-specific sample, it does not seek statistical generalization. Instead, it offers an analytically oriented account of how influencers described the uses, limits, and perceived consequences of AI in war-related persuasion.

The politically charged context and the participants’ public roles also required reflexive caution. Responses may have been shaped by self-presentation, social desirability, and retrospective rationalization. These possibilities were considered during coding and are addressed again in the discussion of limitations.

Table 1 summarizes interviewees’ demographics.

Table 1: Interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Field	Main Platforms
G.	25	Male	Beauty	Instagram/TikTok
Y.	30	Male	Travel	Instagram
O.	32	Male	Entertainment	Instagram/TikTok
M.	32	Female	Fitness	Instagram
T.	27	Female	Environment	TikTok
N.	34	Female	Independent Journalism	X/Instagram
A.	30	Female	Travel	Instagram/TikTok
R.	26	Female	Entertainment	Instagram/TikTok

4. Findings

4.1 Mixed Adoption of AI

Participants reported uneven levels of AI adoption. Four of the eight participants said that they had directly created or shared AI-generated war-related content, and one additional participant described limited use of AI for editing post text rather than for generating or sharing war-related imagery. For those who used AI, the technology was described less as an autonomous creator and more as a productivity and packaging aid. For them, AI was used primarily to improve efficiency, sharpen wording, or enhance visual appeal:

“It makes it look like the lighting is better... cuts down my time a lot.” (M.).

“It doesn’t write for me; it helps me be more accurate.” (T.).

By contrast, three participants described deliberate non-use, citing either unfamiliarity with the tools or concern that synthetic content could undermine their credibility:

“I haven’t used AI because I don’t know how...” (G.).

“I don’t use it [...] it harms your credibility” (A.).

4.2 Emotional Amplification and Narrative Packaging

A recurrent theme across interviews was that AI could intensify emotional communication. Participants described AI-generated visuals as capable of making suffering, captivity, or destruction feel more immediate and more shareable:

“AI images of hostages were so powerful... almost Hollywood-like... people kept sharing them” (G.).

In this sense, AI was understood as amplifying narrative packaging: it could help present a message in a way that would evoke empathy, anger, solidarity, or urgency more forcefully than a plain textual statement alone. T. explains how synthetic portrayals of captives of war scenes helped her empathize with events otherwise too abstract to grasp:

“It helps me connect... I see what it means, even if it’s artificial” (T.).

Participants did not interpret this capacity uniformly as deceptive. Several drew a distinction between what they regarded as legitimate illustrative enhancement and outright fabrication. A. argued that synthetic presentation could be acceptable when it served to communicate what she regarded as a truthful underlying message:

“For delivering [a message] that is real [...] than it’s not a problem” (A.).

Even so, participants repeatedly acknowledged that the same affordance could be used to intensify emotional manipulation and circulate compelling but misleading portrayals.

4.3 AI as an Informational Weapon: Between Persuasion and Propaganda

Participants frequently described AI in instrumental terms, as a powerful technology whose effects depended on the intentions of the user. This framing positioned AI as neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but as a neutral tool that could be weaponized in an ongoing struggle over narrative legitimacy. R. stressed that AI could bolster Israel's messaging, yet "the other side" does the same, and M. compared AI to a weapon that could protect or harm depending on who controlled it, underscoring the perceived stakes of synthetic media in conflict settings:

"If someone has good intentions, they'll use it to protect. If someone wants to harm, we all see what happens... it's like a gun (M.)."

This instrumental framing also revealed a thin boundary between persuasion and propaganda. Participants accepted emotionally persuasive communication as part of contemporary social media practice, yet many also acknowledged that AI made it easier to construct dramatic, strategically selective, or sensational material:

"Whoever uses it tries to create specific sentiments [...] make up some horrific story [...] this leads you to ask: 'whom does it serve?'" (N.).

N. summarized this concern by noting that highly emotive AI-assisted stories invite the question of whom the content ultimately serves. The result is an environment in which persuasive optimization and propaganda distortion can become difficult to separate.

4.4 In-Group Bias and Asymmetrical Ethical Judgment

A striking pattern in the interviews was that ethical evaluation was often filtered through political alignment. Participants were more likely to regard AI-assisted content from their own side as justified, accurate, or morally defensible, while characterizing opposing content as manipulative, fabricated, or deceptive. This asymmetry did not appear as a peripheral attitude, but as a central interpretive lens through which authenticity and legitimacy were judged:

"They post stuff that ... they had no way of proving because they knew it's not real." (M.).

Such reasoning suggests that evaluations of AI-generated persuasion are not based solely on production technique or disclosure, but also on narrative identification. In other words, the same synthetic affordance could be understood as ethical testimony when used by one side and as propaganda when used by the other. This pattern is important because it complicates any simple expectation that technical labeling alone will resolve disputes over credibility.

4.5 Audience Vulnerability and Media-Literacy Gaps

Participants also emphasized differences in audience vulnerability. Several argued that older relatives or less digitally fluent users might be more likely to accept synthetic content at face value, particularly when it circulated in personal, intimate spaces such as family groups or personal feeds:

"Older people get confused more easily" (T.).

"My mom, when she sees this, it works on her [convinces her]" (O.).

"[My mother would share AI-generated synthetic content in family groups on WhatsApp] like it's a real thing". (Y.).

Some described themselves as informal interpreters who explained to parents or relatives why a compelling image or video might not be authentic.

These observations did not amount to a simple age-based determinism. Rather, they reflected a broader concern that media-literacy capacities are unevenly distributed, while AI-generated content is becoming increasingly easy to produce and increasingly difficult to identify.

4.6 Calls for Regulation Alongside Feasibility Doubts

Seven of the eight participants explicitly supported stronger safeguards for AI-generated content, especially clearer disclosure mechanisms such as labels or watermarks. Transparency was repeatedly described as a condition of legitimacy, particularly when the content was visually realistic or politically sensitive:

Participants viewed disclosure as a way to preserve some distinction between documentation and synthetic illustration:

"[It is legitimate] if it specifically says it's AI and it's clearly AI" (R.).

"There has to be regulation with this thing [...] some kind of law, some kind of constitution [...] it's very scary now, what can be done with it" (R.).

At the same time, support for regulation was accompanied by skepticism. Participants doubted whether global rules could keep pace with technological change or whether platforms could consistently enforce them:

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way, so people have to set the boundaries themselves, [they] need to know what to believe, what not to believe, and [...] protect themselves." (G.)

Some argued that determined actors would simply find new ways around disclosure requirements. This combination of normative support and practical doubt shows that the desire for regulation did not translate into confidence that regulation would work smoothly at scale.

4.7 Future Blurring Between Authenticity and Fabrication

Participants broadly anticipated that the distinction between real and artificial content would become even more difficult to sustain. Several expected AI-generated war media to become more immersive, more emotionally optimized, and less dependent on clearly documentary forms. They also raised the possibility that virtual personas or entirely synthetic influencers could eventually attract large audiences and shape public discourse in their own right:

"We might not even know if someone's real or not... Will AI personas become celebrities?" (Y.).

This future-oriented concern underscores the broader significance participants attributed to AI. They did not view the current moment as a temporary disruption, but as an early stage in a longer transformation of online persuasion. The challenge, as they saw it, was not only how to detect current synthetic media, but how to maintain meaningful standards of trust and judgment as synthetic communication becomes normalized.

5. Discussion

The findings show that AI is perceived by influencers not merely as a technical aid, but as a communicative intensifier. Participants described AI as useful for compression, editing, visual enhancement, and emotional packaging, all of which can strengthen persuasive communication. This aligns with research that treats digital persuasion as increasingly affective, platform-native, and optimized for visibility rather than evidentiary depth (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

At the same time, the interviews suggest that ethical judgment is deeply contextual and often politically asymmetrical. Participants did not simply distinguish between authentic and fake content at the level of technique. Rather, they frequently judged AI-generated materials through the lens of narrative allegiance, treating in-group persuasion as more defensible than out-group persuasion. This pattern supports the relevance of information-warfare approaches, which emphasize that conflict communication is inseparable from struggles over legitimacy, selective framing, and moral authority (Prier, 2020).

The study also highlights influencers as emerging gatekeepers in wartime communication. Although they operate outside formal newsroom structures, participants described responsibilities that resemble editorial work, including deciding what to post, how to frame it, and how to interpret questionable content for followers. Yet unlike professional journalism, these responsibilities are exercised without stable institutional norms, which can make ethical boundaries more situational and more vulnerable to identification-driven bias.

The findings further suggest that governance responses must be understood as necessary but insufficient. Participants largely favored transparency measures such as labeling, yet they also doubted that technical or legal mechanisms alone could resolve the underlying conflict over credibility. This skepticism is analytically important. It implies that the governance problem is not limited to a lack of disclosure; it also concerns trust, political polarization, and uneven media literacy. For that reason, platform accountability, creator norms, and public education likely need to be considered together rather than as separate solutions.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a small and context-specific sample of eight Israeli influencers and therefore does not support broad claims about influencers in general or about conflict communication across settings. Second, the findings rely on self-reported accounts, which may be shaped by memory, impression management, and social desirability, particularly given the political sensitivity of the topic. Third, the study captures a relatively early stage of a rapidly evolving conflict and technological landscape; perceptions and practices may shift over time as AI tools and public norms change.

Future research could extend this work in several directions. Comparative studies across countries, platforms, and conflict settings would help clarify which patterns are context-bound and which are more general. Larger mixed-method designs could combine interviews with content analysis, platform trace data, or audience studies. Additional work is also needed on how disclosure, labeling, and creator norms affect audience interpretation when emotionally compelling synthetic content circulates in polarized environments.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Israeli social media influencers perceived and used generative AI in war-related persuasion during the first months of the Israel-Gaza war. The findings indicate that AI is understood simultaneously as a practical production aid, an emotional amplifier, and a source of ethical uncertainty. Participants described its capacity to clarify messages, strengthen narrative packaging, and increase engagement, while also recognizing its potential to distort, manipulate, and intensify distrust.

Overall, the study suggests that AI does not simply add a new tool to conflict communication. It reshapes the conditions under which authenticity, persuasion, and credibility are negotiated. In that sense, the significance of AI-generated persuasion lies not only in the content it helps produce, but also in the changing standards by which creators and audiences decide what to believe, share, and contest.

Ethics Declaration

The study received institutional ethics approval from Ariel university, approval number AU-COM-NS-20240330. All participants provided informed consent prior to the interview. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, interviews were recorded with permission, and identifying details were removed during transcription and reporting. Because the topic concerned traumatic and politically sensitive war-related content, the study prioritized confidentiality and minimal disclosure of identifying professional details.

AI Declaration

Generative AI was used only for language-level editing and proofreading during manuscript preparation. It was not used to generate data, conduct the analysis, interpret the findings, or fabricate references or quotations. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the content as necessary and assume full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the published work.

Data Availability

The interview material is not publicly available due to the combination of topic, platform visibility, and occupational role that may make participants identifiable. De-identified excerpts may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical constraints.

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