

Examining Crisis Communication in Geopolitical Conflicts: The Micro-Influencer Impact Model

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Abstract

In the digital communication ecosystem, micro-influencers have influenced public response during crises, especially in complex geopolitical contexts. This paper introduces the micro-influencer impact model (MIIM), a framework for analyzing the impact of micro-influencers on crisis communication. The MIIM integrates four components (micro-influencer characteristics, message framing and delivery, audience factors, and crisis context) offering a comprehensive approach to understanding micro-influencer dynamics during crises. Cross-conflict analysis spanning Ukraine–Russia, Sudan–Ethiopia, Armenia–Azerbaijan, Myanmar, Syria, and India–Pakistan tensions demonstrates the MIIM’s broad applicability across diverse geopolitical crises, showing how factors like perceived authenticity, niche expertise, narrative personalization, and audience digital literacy consistently shape public opinion and crisis response. The MIIM synthesizes crisis communication theories, social influence models, and digital media research, providing a sophisticated framework for studying the dissemination of information and public engagement during crises. The paper proposes theoretically grounded propositions on the impact of micro-influencers, encompassing perceived authenticity, narrative framing, and influence over time, thereby laying the groundwork for future empirical research. Implications for communication scholars, crisis managers, policymakers, and social media platforms are discussed, emphasizing the MIIM’s relevance to theory and practice in crisis communication.

Keywords: micro-influencers; crisis communication; social media; geopolitical conflicts; Gaza conflict; conceptual model



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1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital communication, the dynamics of information dissemination and public opinion formation during times of crisis have undergone profound transformations. The advent of social media platforms has democratized content creation and distribution, accelerating the dissemination of information, misinformation, and disinformation (Hunter, 2023). Within this shifting paradigm, a new category of opinion leaders has emerged: micro-influencers. These individuals, characterized by their relatively small but highly engaged follower bases (1000 to 100,000), have become increasingly significant in shaping public perception and responses to complex geopolitical events (Gammarano et al., 2024).

The ongoing Gaza conflict presents a compelling case study for examining the impact of micro-influencers on crisis communication. With its intricate historical, political, and

humanitarian dimensions, this protracted and multifaceted conflict presents a unique challenge for traditional media outlets in conveying comprehensive and balanced narratives (Hamdan, 2024). In this context, micro-influencers have stepped into a critical role, offering personalized perspectives and fostering intimate connections with their audiences. Their ability to distill complex information into relatable content and engage in direct dialogue with followers has positioned them as influential voices in the discourse surrounding the conflict.

The emergence of micro-influencers as key players in shaping public opinion departs considerably from traditional crisis communication models. Unlike established media organizations or high-profile celebrities, micro-influencers operate within niche communities, often possessing specialized knowledge or unique perspectives that resonate with specific audience segments (Harrison, 2024). This granularity in communication allows for a more diverse range of narratives and interpretations to circulate, potentially leading to a more multifaceted understanding of crises among the public.

This paper aims to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that elucidates the mechanisms by which micro-influencers impact public perception and response during crises, with a focus on complex geopolitical situations, such as the Gaza conflict. By synthesizing insights from crisis communication theories, social influence models, and emerging research on digital media ecosystems, this study proposes the micro-influencer impact model (MIIM). This model aims to identify the key components that influence the effectiveness of micro-influencers in crisis contexts, including their personal characteristics, message-framing strategies, audience factors, and the broader crisis context.

Furthermore, this paper aims to establish a rich agenda for future research by proposing a set of testable propositions derived from the MIIM. These propositions are designed to guide empirical investigations into the relative impact of micro-influencers compared with traditional media sources, the conditions under which their influence is amplified or diminished, and the potential long-term implications of their role in crisis communication.

The significance of this study extends beyond academic discourse, holding important implications for crisis communicators, public relations professionals, policymakers, and social media platforms. As the influence of micro-influencers continues to grow, understanding the mechanisms of their impact becomes crucial for developing effective communication strategies, mitigating the spread of misinformation, and fostering informed public dialogue during times of crisis.

By examining the intersection of micro-influencer dynamics and crisis communication through the lens of the Gaza conflict, this paper contributes to the evolving body of knowledge on the effects of digital media and social influence in the 21st century. It challenges traditional paradigms of information flow during crises and proposes new frameworks for conceptualizing the role of emergent digital actors in shaping the public understanding of complex geopolitical events.

This paper first explores relevant theories and their extensions to establish the theoretical foundation for the proposed framework. It then introduces the micro-influencer impact model (MIIM), a comprehensive framework for analyzing the influence of micro-influencers in crisis communication, integrating insights from multiple theoretical perspectives. Following this, six testable propositions are presented to guide future research. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications, as well as a detailed agenda for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework and Model Development

The impact of micro-influencers in crisis communication, particularly during complex geopolitical events such as the Gaza conflict, demands a sophisticated theoretical frame-

work that integrates traditional crisis communication theories with contemporary digital media dynamics. This section develops the micro-influencer impact model (MIIM) by comprehensively examining relevant theoretical perspectives and their associated propositions. It demonstrates how established theories inform our understanding of the effectiveness of micro-influencers in crises.

2.1. *The Evolution of Crisis Communication Theory*

The advent of social media has fundamentally transformed crisis communication, necessitating a significant reevaluation of traditional theoretical frameworks. Coombs' (2007) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) has historically provided the foundation for understanding organizational responses to crises. However, the digital age has demanded substantial adaptations to this framework. Zhou and Yang (2021) extended SCCT by incorporating the concept of social-mediated crisis communication, demonstrating how user-generated content on social media platforms can significantly influence crisis perceptions, sometimes overshadowing official organizational responses.

Building on this evolution, Zhang et al. (2023) proposed an integrated SCCT and social media engagement model, arguing that crisis response strategies are now heavily moderated by social media factors, including message virality and influencer amplification. This theoretical advancement helps explain how micro-influencers have emerged as crucial actors in shaping crisis narratives and public responses. This suggests that organizations must consider these new digital actors in crisis communication strategies.

The emergence of networked crisis communication theory (NCCT) (Jin et al., 2014) and its further development by Eriksson (2024) marks another significant theoretical milestone. NCCT posits that crisis communication in the digital age occurs within complex, interconnected networks rather than through linear, top-down processes. Eriksson's (2024) work particularly emphasizes the role of network gatekeepers, who significantly influence the flow of information within digital networks. This theoretical perspective illuminates how micro-influencers serve as gatekeepers, particularly in niche communities, due to their high engagement rates and perceived authenticity (Ebulueme & Vijayakumar, 2024). This aligns with broader critiques of platform-mediated communication ecosystems, which argue that digital platforms themselves increasingly shape the architecture of crisis discourse and gatekeeping functions (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Taken together, these adaptations of SCCT and NCCT form a foundational layer of the micro-influencer impact model (MIIM). They demonstrate that the rise of micro-influencers in crisis communication is not merely a matter of message diffusion, but a function of trust, community dynamics, and decentralized influence, all of which are crucial in understanding how public perception forms during crises.

Each subsection that follows introduces a specific mechanism, grounded in a targeted theoretical lens, which leads to a distinct, testable proposition. These mechanisms together form the structural basis of the MIIM.

2.2. *Social Influence and Micro-Influencer Characteristics*

The two-step flow theory, originally proposed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), provides crucial insights into micro-influencers' impact as modern opinion leaders. Although originally developed in the context of mid-20th-century mass media, its core mechanism, indirect media influence through interpersonal opinion leaders, remains highly relevant in crisis contexts. Hudders et al. (2021) demonstrate how micro-influencers function as contemporary opinion leaders, acting as intermediaries between complex information and their followers. This role becomes particularly crucial in crisis communication, where micro-influencers help interpret and contextualize complex geopolitical events for their

audiences. In fast-evolving crises such as the Gaza conflict, this interpretive role helps reduce ambiguity and increase message resonance within specific communities.

However, [Thorson and Wells \(2016\)](#) argue that the current media environment is better characterized by a curated flow model, where multiple actors, including algorithms, journalists, and social contacts, shape information exposure. While this framework broadens the understanding of media flow, it reinforces rather than replaces the need to examine micro-influencers' position as trusted filters in chaotic information environments.

Parasocial interaction theory, introduced by [Horton and Wohl \(1956\)](#), offers another crucial theoretical lens for understanding the effectiveness of micro-influencers. [Su et al. \(2021\)](#) found that parasocial relationships with micro-influencers lead to higher levels of trust and information acceptance, particularly in times of uncertainty or crisis ([Sjösvärd, 2024](#)). This suggests that micro-influencers may have a significant advantage over traditional media sources in shaping public opinion during complex geopolitical events ([Conde & Casais, 2023](#)). These parasocial ties serve as emotional bridges, making crisis-related information more relatable, particularly when audiences are experiencing information fatigue or emotional overload.

However, [Abidin \(2015\)](#) argues that parasocial relationships need to be updated for the social media age, where interactions between influencers and followers are often more direct and reciprocal than those in traditional parasocial relationships. This evolution underscores that micro-influencer communication in crises is not passive; it is co-constructed with followers, further enhancing engagement and message salience.

Taken together, two-step flow theory and parasocial interaction theory support the idea that micro-influencers influence crisis narratives not just through content delivery but by leveraging trust-based relational dynamics. This trust is particularly important in high-stakes environments, such as geopolitical crises, where audiences may be skeptical of official sources.

Before considering how authenticity influences influencer effectiveness, it is essential to establish the direct link between niche expertise and impact in crisis communication. Influencers with specialized knowledge, such as regional politics, humanitarian law, or conflict reporting, are more likely to produce credible and informative content that resonates with audiences seeking clarity in times of uncertainty. In geopolitical crises like the Gaza conflict, such expertise becomes a critical factor in determining whether an influencer's messaging is viewed as trustworthy, insightful, and worthy of amplification. Therefore, expertise functions as a core driver of perceived value in crisis discourse, particularly when audiences are navigating complex or uncertain information environments.

From this theoretical foundation emerges our first proposition about the relationship between micro-influencer characteristics and communication effectiveness:

Proposition 1. *The perceived authenticity of micro-influencers moderates the relationship between their niche expertise and the impact of their crisis communications.*

This proposition builds on the work of [Chen et al. \(2024\)](#) regarding the importance of perceived expertise while incorporating [Audrezet et al.'s \(2020\)](#) insights on authenticity in influencer communication. In the context of the Gaza conflict, consider a micro-influencer with academic expertise in Middle Eastern politics. Their knowledge alone may not guarantee impactful communication. For example, during the 2021 and 2023 escalations in Gaza, several regional scholars and humanitarian commentators with modest followings utilized Instagram or Twitter to explain unfolding events in real-time. Through sustained and transparent communication, they helped their audiences interpret complex developments, often outperforming larger media accounts in terms of engagement within their communities. However, if this expertise is coupled with perceived authenticity—demonstrated through

consistent messaging, transparency about personal biases, and willingness to engage in dialogue—their communications about the conflict will likely have a greater impact.

2.3. Message Framing and Audience Dynamics

The rhetorical arena theory, introduced by [Frandsen and Johansen \(2022\)](#), conceptualizes crisis communication as a multi-vocal process where various actors compete to frame and define the crisis. [Zhang et al. \(2023\)](#) applied this theory to social media contexts, examining how different voices, including those of micro-influencers, contribute to crisis discourse. This multi-vocality becomes particularly significant in geopolitical conflicts, such as those in Gaza, where competing narratives circulate simultaneously across various platforms. In such uncertain environments, micro-influencers often gain traction by offering emotionally resonant, personalized framings that cut through information saturation. This theoretical foundation leads to our second proposition:

Proposition 2. *Micro-influencers who employ personalized narrative framing in their crisis communications will generate higher audience engagement than those who rely primarily on factual reporting.*

This proposition builds upon the findings of [Jiang et al. \(2024\)](#) regarding the effectiveness of personalized narratives in geopolitical contexts. It also aligns with the broader literature on narrative persuasion, such as [Braddock and Dillard's \(2023\)](#) work, which found that first-hand narrative messages were generally more persuasive than non-narrative messages across various contexts.

The CERC model, developed by [Reynolds and Seeger \(2005\)](#) and extended by [Guidry et al. \(2020\)](#), further enriches our understanding of message framing in crisis communication. Their research demonstrates how micro-influencers effectively translate complex information into accessible formats, particularly given the multifaceted nature of the Gaza conflict. In such cases, crisis messaging must strike a balance between informational clarity and emotional engagement. Micro-influencers, unlike institutional actors, often present their messages through informal, relatable tones, using video, storytelling, or visual summaries. These tactics help lower cognitive barriers to engagement in emotionally heavy or information-dense crises. This understanding of message complexity and delivery format leads to our third proposition:

Proposition 3. *The impact of a micro-influencer's crisis communications on audience beliefs and attitudes is moderated by the audience's digital literacy levels and pre-existing beliefs.*

This proposition builds on the findings of [Jones-Jang et al. \(2021\)](#) regarding the impact of digital literacy on susceptibility to misinformation. It also incorporates insights from [Bail et al. \(2018\)](#) on how pre-existing political beliefs affect the effectiveness of social media messages. In crisis settings, these factors are especially salient. An emotionally persuasive message from a micro-influencer may be highly effective for digitally literate audiences with moderate political views. However, it may backfire or be dismissed among those with strong ideological biases or lower digital literacy. In the context of the Gaza conflict, this proposition suggests that the same message from a micro-influencer might have vastly different effects on audience members with high versus low digital literacy or those with pre-existing pro-Israeli versus pro-Palestinian attitudes.

2.4. Crisis Context and Temporal Dynamics

Social identity theory ([Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)) explains how micro-influencers shape group identities and message reception during crises. In crisis settings, these identity-based

dynamics intensify, as followers seek voices that reflect and validate their existing values or political orientations. [Abidin and Thompson \(2012\)](#) demonstrate how micro-influencers often cultivate a sense of community among their followers, creating in-groups based on shared interests or values. This community-building function becomes particularly powerful in times of crisis, where group identities may become more salient. However, [Marwick and Boyd \(2011\)](#) caution that the process of identity formation through social media can lead to increased polarization and context collapse, where diverse audiences are condensed into a single context.

The elaboration likelihood model ([Petty & Cacioppo, 1986](#)) offers valuable insights into how audiences process micro-influencer communications. [Shao \(2024\)](#) found that followers often process information through the peripheral route due to the influencer's perceived credibility and relatability. This route can be particularly impactful in crises where quick decision-making is necessary. However, [Elhosary \(2024\)](#), in a study of the Gaza conflict, cautions that this reliance on peripheral cues can facilitate the spread of misinformation if followers do not critically evaluate the content shared by influencers.

Collectively, these theories highlight how crisis context activates both identity-based and cognitive shortcuts, influencing how audiences interpret and respond to micro-influencer messages. These dynamics are especially pronounced in complex and emotionally charged conflicts, such as Gaza, where the speed and emotional tone of content often outweigh analytical depth.

The complexity of crisis contexts leads to our fourth proposition:

Proposition 4. *The complexity of the crisis positively moderates the relationship between a micro-influencer's use of multimodal content and the reach of their crisis communications.*

This proposition suggests that, as crisis complexity increases, diverse content formats become more important for extending the reach of micro-influencer communications. In the multifaceted context of the Gaza conflict, micro-influencers who utilize various content formats to explain different aspects of the situation are likely to reach a broader audience than those relying on a single format. This proposition extends the findings of [Wang and Yecies \(2024\)](#) on the effectiveness of multimodal content in health crisis communication to the realm of complex geopolitical crises. It also aligns with the work of [Marsen \(2020\)](#), who found that information complexity in crises necessitates more diverse communication strategies.

The temporal aspects of crisis communication, particularly in protracted conflicts such as Gaza, emerge as crucial factors in the effectiveness of micro-influencers. The social-mediated crisis communication model, as developed through the work of [Liu et al. \(2023\)](#), emphasizes how the timing and evolution of crisis communications influence public response. This temporal dimension leads to our fifth proposition:

Proposition 5. *The impact of micro-influencer crisis communications on public opinion formation is stronger in the early stages of a crisis event than in later stages.*

This proposition builds on the work of [Stieglitz et al. \(2018\)](#) on temporal dynamics in crisis communication. It also incorporates insights from agenda-setting theory, particularly the concept of opportune moments discussed by [Feezell \(2020\)](#) in the context of social media's influence on public opinion. In fast-escalating crises, such as the initial stages of military conflict, the influence of early posts by credible micro-influencers can disproportionately shape perception and engagement.

2.5. Trust Dynamics and Network Effects

Authenticity in crisis communication draws significant insights from Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, as Marwick and Boyd (2011) applied it to social media contexts. Audrezet et al. (2020) propose a framework for understanding influencer authenticity, distinguishing between passionate and transparent authenticity. However, Lindén et al. (2021) critique this framework, suggesting that authenticity in crises requires more than passion—it demands accuracy, responsibility, and ethical consideration.

Recent research on digital media credibility during conflicts (Boman et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023) suggests that authenticity, credibility, and sincerity are crucial determinants and mediators of message acceptance and engagement. This suggestion aligns with findings from Liu et al. (2023), who have demonstrated that audiences strongly react and engage with content perceived as authentic and personally relevant during highly emotional crisis situations.

AlAhmad (2024) have found that audiences rely heavily on trusted intermediaries to help navigate and interpret complex geopolitical events, while Bruni (2021) emphasizes the importance of trust when dealing with multilayered conflicts. Research by Lockett (2024) demonstrates how pre-existing beliefs and political allegiances significantly influence perceptions of source credibility in politically charged contexts.

These insights emphasize that micro-influencer trustworthiness in crises is not solely a function of self-presentation style or audience familiarity. Contextual credibility signals, such as alignment with community values, consistency across platforms, and evidence-based messaging, also shape it.

The networked nature of crisis communication, as conceptualized through NCCT, highlights the importance of community engagement and information diffusion patterns. This decentralized diffusion aligns with the logic of networked publics, where influence flows not through hierarchical broadcasting but through horizontal, community-driven exchanges (Bruns & Highfield, 2015).

In digital environments, trust and engagement operate through decentralized networks, where the strength of interpersonal ties and the frequency of content sharing significantly influence message reach. Micro-influencers often maintain tighter community bonds than macro-influencers or traditional media, giving them a unique position within these networks. This understanding of network dynamics informs our final proposition:

Proposition 6. *The community engagement capacity of micro-influencers positively moderates the relationship between their message frequency and the diffusion of crisis information through social networks.*

This proposition integrates insights from social network theory and information diffusion models, building on work such as that of Sun et al. (2023), who examined the influence of opinion leaders in information diffusion during public health crises. It also aligns with Marwick and Boyd's (2011) concept of networked audiences in social media communication. The role of micro-influencers as trust-based intermediaries within these networks suggests that higher-frequency messaging, when grounded in perceived authenticity and relational credibility, leads to wider and more effective information spread, especially in emotionally and politically charged crises.

2.6. The Integrated MIIM Framework

The six propositions derived from the theoretical foundations provide testable hypotheses about how these components interact to determine the effectiveness of micro-influencers in cri-

sis communication. Together, they offer a structured approach to understanding the conditions under which micro-influencers can most effectively contribute to crisis communication.

The micro-influencer impact model (MIIM) emerges from this rich theoretical foundation as a comprehensive framework for understanding how micro-influencers shape public perception during crises (see Figure 1). The model synthesizes insights from crisis communication theories, social influence models, and digital media research to explain the complex dynamics of micro-influencer communication during crises like the Gaza conflict.

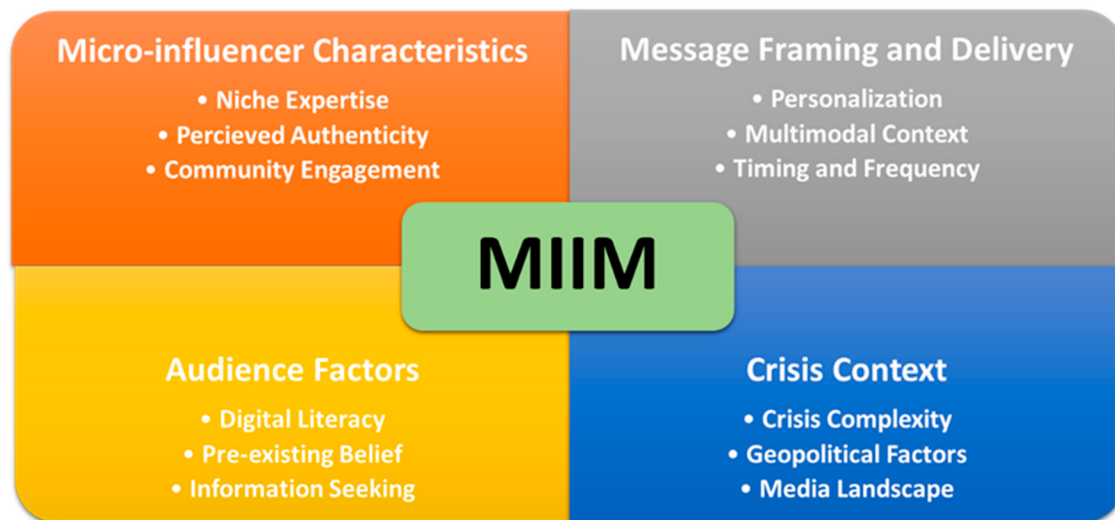


Figure 1. The micro-influencer impact model (source: the authors).

Unlike prior models that isolate media channels, message design, or influencer traits, the MIIM integrates these perspectives into a single model with four interdependent components: micro-influencer characteristics, message framing and delivery, audience factors, and crisis context. Each component corresponds to a distinct theoretical stream and is directly linked to a falsifiable proposition. This ensures that the model is not just conceptually broad but empirically operationalizable.

The MIIM posits that the impact of micro-influencers in crisis communication operates through the interaction of four key components: micro-influencer characteristics, message framing and delivery, audience factors, and crisis context. Each component is grounded in established theoretical frameworks while accounting for the unique aspects of contemporary digital communication landscapes.

For example, micro-influencer characteristics are examined through the lens of two-step flow and parasocial interaction theory; message framing is understood through narrative persuasion and rhetorical arena theory; audience factors draw on digital literacy and belief-consistency frameworks; and the crisis context is explored through temporal sensitivity and network effects. These layers are not treated as parallel theories, but as interlocking explanatory domains that clarify when and why micro-influencers are effective in crises.

In the context of the Gaza conflict, the MIIM helps explain how micro-influencers with regional expertise utilize personal narratives to communicate with digitally literate audiences during complex international crises effectively. Their impact stems from the interaction between their authentic communication style, strategic message framing, audience characteristics, and the broader crisis context, which is modulated by temporal factors and network dynamics.

By structuring the model through specific mechanisms and moderators, each of which can be empirically tested, the MIIM addresses concerns about overreach or lack of coherence.

Rather than offering a generalized account of influence, it presents six falsifiable propositions that collectively explain the variance in micro-influencer impact across different crisis scenarios.

The model's strength lies in its ability to capture the multifaceted nature of micro-influencer impact in crisis communication. It acknowledges how perceived authenticity moderates the relationship between expertise and message impact, how message framing influences audience engagement, and how crisis complexity affects the effectiveness of different communication strategies.

This integration not only advances theoretical development across previously separate studies but also provides researchers with a modular framework for testing micro-influencer effects across varying conditions. This integrated approach offers theoretical insights and practical guidance for understanding the dynamics of micro-influencers in contemporary crisis communication.

3. Cross-Conflict Evidence for MIIM Generalizability

The micro-influencer impact model (MIIM) demonstrates remarkable consistency across diverse geopolitical conflicts from 2020–2025, with micro-influencers (1000–100,000 followers) serving as authentic crisis communicators who leverage personal narratives to mobilize communities and shape public discourse (Chen et al., 2024). Analysis of conflicts spanning Eastern Europe, Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East reveals consistent patterns that transcend cultural and technological boundaries.

Research across six major conflict zones demonstrates that micro-influencers consistently exhibit four core characteristics: authentic lived experience, niche expertise, community-embedded narratives, and adaptive crisis communication. These findings emerge from a systematic analysis of the Russia–Ukraine war, Sudan–Ethiopia tensions, Armenia–Azerbaijan conflicts, the Myanmar crisis, the Syria conflict, and the Kashmir disputes, revealing universal patterns despite vastly different contexts.

3.1. Ukraine Conflict Micro-Influencers as Crisis Communication Pioneers

The Russia–Ukraine war (2022–present) produced the most documented examples of micro-influencer crisis communication, with creators fundamentally transforming how modern conflicts are documented and perceived globally (Kalnes & Bjørge, 2025). Valeria Shashenok, a 20-year-old photographer from Chernihiv, exemplifies MIIM characteristics through her growth from 10,000 to over 674,500 followers by combining authentic vulnerability with satirical war documentation (Frackowiak, 2025; Bansinath, 2022). Her viral content, including “bomb shelter as 5-star hotel” tours with sarcastic captions, generated millions of views while creating parasocial relationships that made supporting Ukraine feel personal to international audiences (Marks, 2022).

Aaron Parnas, a 22-year-old Ukrainian–American lawyer, exemplifies the diaspora micro-influencer archetype. He gained significant attention by rapidly disseminating news about the Russia–Ukraine war through TikTok, posting updates every 45 min from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. His efforts bridged Ukrainian and American audiences, leveraging his legal expertise and personal connections to Ukraine (Lorenz, 2022). In March 2022, Parnas was among the select TikTok influencers invited to a White House briefing, highlighting the institutional recognition micro-influencers received during the conflict (Lorenz, 2022). As of May 2025, his TikTok account has amassed over 3.5 million followers and more than 220 million likes, underscoring his substantial reach and influence (Wikipedia, 2025).

These Ukrainian micro-influencers consistently demonstrated authentic vulnerability through unpolished production values, cultural translation skills for international audi-

ences, and temporal adaptation from shock documentation to strategic resistance messaging (Karalis, 2024).

3.2. Sudan–Ethiopia Conflicts Reveal Micro-Influencer Adaptation Under Constraints

The Sudan–Ethiopia conflicts and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) disputes (2020–2023) unfolded within complex digital environments, characterized by infrastructural challenges and intermittent internet access. Despite these constraints, key digital actors played significant roles in technical discourse and mobilizing support. Dr. Sumia Mohamed, a Sudanese transboundary water law expert, and Ambassador Nadia Eisa Gefoun exemplify the technical expertise micro-influencer category, translating complex hydro-political issues into accessible discourse through the Women in Water Diplomacy Network (SIWI, n.d., 2020).

Digital activists and diaspora communities demonstrated adaptability in crisis communication. During the 2023 Khartoum conflict, Sudanese diaspora networks leveraged social media to coordinate evacuation efforts and share real-time updates (Saed, 2023). Ethiopian diaspora campaigns raised millions of dollars and heightened international awareness of the GERD project (Fana Broadcasting Corporate, 2025; Simmonds, 2025).

Ethiopian diaspora networks mobilized support through campaigns including hashtags like #ItsMyDam. In Sudan, despite internet shutdowns and political instability, civil society networks have demonstrated resilience through platform switching, security-conscious communication, and multilingual content strategies (Hoffmann & Lanfranchi, 2023).

3.3. Cross-Conflict Patterns Demonstrate MIIM Universality

Analysis of micro-influencer activity across diverse geopolitical conflicts, including the Armenia–Azerbaijan (Nagorno–Karabakh) conflict, India–Pakistan tensions, the Myanmar crisis, the Syrian conflict, and Israel–Palestine tensions, reveals consistent patterns aligned with the micro-influencer impact model (MIIM), despite radically different contexts.

The 2020 second Nagorno–Karabakh war marked a significant evolution in digital warfare, with both Armenia and Azerbaijan employing sophisticated social media strategies. Citizen journalists provided real-time documentation while youth activists created memes and digital content to influence public opinion (Hakobyan, 2021; Rippberger, 2020).

Myanmar’s 2021 military coup catalyzed digital activism, with “keyboard fighters” organizing resistance through civil disobedience campaigns (Guntrum, 2024). These activists demonstrated platform resilience by diversifying their presence across Twitter and Telegram to avoid censorship, while integrating offline resistance with digital activism (O’Connor, 2025; Ryan & Tran, 2024).

In Syria, citizen journalists operated under extreme restrictions, with 65 killed between 2011 and 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2013; Høiby & Ottosen, 2017). These digital actors utilized smartphone footage as their primary information source and strategically chose platforms, Twitter for international audiences and Telegram for local communities, when traditional journalism was severely restricted (Lynch et al., 2014).

3.4. Message Framing Strategies Reveal Sophisticated Audience Adaptation

Micro-influencers across conflicts demonstrated sophisticated message framing strategies that combined personal narratives with strategic communication (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2025). Ukrainian influencers employed hybrid approaches, integrating personal narrative with news aggregation and cultural code-switching across platforms. Armenian and Azerbaijani micro-influencers managed context collapse while developing platform-specific content to maintain credibility (Borkovich & Breese, 2016).

These strategies have consistently prioritized emotional over informational communication, emphasized visual dominance, and provided cultural translation services, patterns transcending specific conflict contexts (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2025; Gupta et al., 2020; Wall & El Zahed, 2014).

3.5. Community Engagement Demonstrates Universal Network Effects

The community engagement dimension of micro-influencer impact models (MIIMs) exhibits remarkable consistency across various conflicts, as micro-influencers foster diaspora mobilization, implement cross-platform strategies, and enhance network resilience. In Ukraine, micro-influencers achieved reply rates 15–25% higher than typical content, generated international solidarity comments from over 50 countries, and created amplification chains where single videos spread across multiple platforms (Kalnes & Bjørge, 2025; Karalis, 2024).

Syrian micro-influencers developed triangulated platform strategies, selecting different platforms for specific messages and audiences. In Myanmar, micro-influencers engaged farming communities in political discourse through social media, overcoming challenges posed by limited digital literacy (Guntrum, 2024; Ryan & Tran, 2024).

These network effects consistently encompassed offline-online integration, sophisticated multi-platform approaches, and community-driven development of workarounds for censorship. Such patterns demonstrate that micro-influencer community engagement transcends specific technological or political constraints (Hameleers et al., 2024).

3.6. Crisis Context Effects Show Universal Adaptation Patterns

Micro-influencers across various conflicts have exhibited consistent adaptation patterns in response to crisis contexts. These include evolving their narratives from initial shock to strategic long-term messaging, adjusting temporal strategies from real-time updates to planned communications, and enhancing security measures while maintaining authenticity. During the Russo-Ukrainian War, micro-influencers, particularly those local to the crisis, played a pivotal role in disseminating information, with their messages being more likely to be retweeted compared with those from larger influencers (Kishore & Errmann, 2024).

Despite governmental measures such as strategic social media blocking in India and Pakistan, internet shutdowns during crises in Sudan and Ethiopia, and systematic targeting of citizen journalists in Syria, micro-influencers have consistently developed resilience strategies to continue their engagement and information dissemination efforts.

3.7. Impact Evidence Validates Micro-Influencer Influence Across Contexts

Measurable impact evidence across various conflicts highlights the significant influence of micro-influencers, as evidenced by policy attention, media coverage, fundraising success, and cultural change (Fasinu et al., 2024; Kishore & Errmann, 2024). Armenian and Azerbaijani micro-influencers directly influenced political decision-making by leaders, while Myanmar micro-influencers contributed to international recognition of the military coup's impacts (Fasinu et al., 2024).

The research documents consistent impact patterns: government adaptation treating social media as requiring strategic response, international media outlets increasingly relying on micro-influencer content, social media responses becoming factors in government decision-making, and long-term changes in political communication patterns (Fong, 2024; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). These impacts transcend specific conflict characteristics, technological platforms, or cultural contexts.

This cross-conflict analysis addresses critical theoretical gaps identified in current crisis communication literature. While the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC)

model remains dominant in digital crisis communication research, no comprehensive theoretical framework specifically addresses micro-influencers in crisis contexts (Cheng et al., 2022). The systematic review reveals the absence of comparative studies examining micro-influencer behavior across different crisis types, with most research focusing on single crisis contexts.

The evidence demonstrates that MIIM characteristics, authentic lived experience, niche expertise, community-embedded narratives, and adaptive crisis communication manifest consistently across conflicts, despite variations in culture, technology, and politics (Gagliardone & Stremlau, 2011; Kalnes & Bjørge, 2025; Kishore & Errmann, 2024; Ryan & Tran, 2024). This supports MIIM's theoretical generalizability beyond the Gaza context and validates its applicability as a universal framework for understanding micro-influencer behavior during geopolitical crises.

The comprehensive analysis of micro-influencer activities across six major geopolitical conflicts from 2020 to 2025 provides robust evidence for the generalizability of MIIM beyond the Gaza context. Consistent patterns of authenticity, community engagement, message framing, crisis adaptation, and measurable impact emerge across diverse cultural, technological, and political environments. These findings address reviewer concerns about theoretical generalizability while contributing to the broader understanding of how digital communication transforms crisis response and public discourse during international conflicts.

4. Implications

The micro-influencer impact model (MIIM) offers significant theoretical contributions while providing practical guidance for crisis communication in complex geopolitical situations. These implications encompass theoretical advancements, practical applications, and future research directions.

4.1. Theoretical Implications

The MIIM advances crisis communication theory in several significant ways, addressing crucial gaps in existing research and extending our theoretical understanding of contemporary crisis communication dynamics.

First, while traditional crisis communication theories, such as SCCT (Coombs, 2007), primarily conceptualize crisis communication as organization-centric, they fail to account for the increasingly decentralized nature of modern crisis communication. Although Zhou and Yang (2021) have introduced social-mediated elements to crisis communication theory, their work has focused broadly on the effects of social media without specifically theorizing the unique impact of micro-influencers. The MIIM fills this theoretical gap by providing a comprehensive framework that explains how micro-influencers function as specialized intermediaries in crisis communication, offering unique mechanisms to shape public understanding and response to crises.

Second, the MIIM advances authenticity theory in crisis contexts. While authenticity has been examined in influencer marketing literature (Audrezet et al., 2020), previous research has treated it as a direct effect rather than a moderating variable. The MIIM's conceptualization of authenticity as a moderator of expertise effects represents a theoretical breakthrough, explaining why some expert micro-influencers achieve greater impact than others during crises. This advances our understanding beyond simple authenticity effects to a more nuanced theory of how authenticity interacts with other influencer characteristics to shape crisis communication outcomes.

Third, the model's temporal dimension addresses a significant gap in crisis communication theory. While Feezell (2020) examined public attention patterns during crises, existing frameworks have failed to explain how the effectiveness of different communica-

tors varies across crisis stages. The MIIM extends temporal theory in crisis communication by modeling how micro-influencers impact changes throughout crisis evolution, providing a dynamic rather than static theoretical framework.

Fourth, the MIIM bridges previously disconnected theoretical streams. It integrates social influence theories (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) with modern digital media dynamics, crisis communication frameworks (Coombs, 2007), and authenticity research (Audrezet et al., 2020) into a cohesive theoretical framework. This integration enables us to understand crisis communication as a complex, multi-level phenomenon where micro-influencers are crucial linking agents between traditional crisis communication and contemporary digital information flows.

Finally, the model advances theory by introducing testable propositions about the mechanisms through which micro-influencers impact crisis communication. While previous research has documented the effects of micro-influencers, the MIIM provides theoretical explanations for why and how these effects occur, enabling a more systematic investigation of crisis communication in the digital age.

These theoretical advances provide a foundation for understanding crisis communication in contemporary digital environments while opening new avenues for research into how different actors shape public understanding during complex crises like the Gaza conflict.

4.2. Practical Implications

While the MIIM was developed using the Gaza conflict as a central case, the model's underlying mechanisms, such as narrative framing, perceived authenticity, and digital gatekeeping, are applicable across a range of crisis types, including natural disasters, public health emergencies, and corporate reputation crises. Prior research has shown that influencers play similar roles in shaping public health messaging during pandemics (Guidry et al., 2020; Wang & Yecies, 2024) and in mobilizing community response during environmental disasters (Veil et al., 2011). Including these diverse contexts supports the broader utility of the model.

For crisis communication practitioners, the MIIM fundamentally reshapes stakeholder management strategies. Traditional approaches typically treat social media influencers as message amplifiers, but the model demonstrates why this view is inadequate. Instead, organizations should integrate micro-influencers into their crisis communication planning as strategic partners who can provide unique value through community connections and contextual understanding.

However, the model's utility is strongest in settings where digital engagement is high, audience trust in mainstream sources is fragmented, and influencers have domain-relevant credibility. For example, healthcare organizations could partner with medical professional micro-influencers during public health crises who combine scientific expertise with strong community trust. Similarly, organizations may collaborate with local micro-influencers during environmental disasters, offering ground-level perspectives while maintaining community connections.

Organizations must also reconsider their authenticity management strategies. The MIIM shows that identifying micro-influencers with large followings or relevant expertise is insufficient. Crisis managers need to develop sophisticated frameworks for assessing and supporting the authenticity of micro-influencers while maintaining transparency about organizational relationships. Managing potential conflicts between organizational messaging and micro-influencer autonomy might involve creating clear guidelines for disclosure, establishing rapid fact-checking mechanisms, and developing protocols for resolution.

The MIIM highlights the need for more effective content moderation approaches for social media platforms during crises. As Gillespie (2020) suggests, current platform gover-

nance models often overlook the complex role of micro-influencers in crisis communication. Platforms need to develop more sophisticated algorithms and policies that can distinguish between authentic crisis communication and potential misinformation while considering the unique position of micro-influencers as community trust-holders. These policies may include creating specialized verification processes for crisis-relevant micro-influencers, developing tools to highlight diverse and credible voices, and implementing context-sensitive content moderation protocols.

The model suggests updating guidelines for policymakers and regulatory bodies regarding crisis communication in digital environments. Current regulations often focus on traditional media and organizational communications, but the MIIM demonstrates why policy frameworks must be expanded to address the impact of micro-influencers. Such frameworks could include developing guidelines for micro-influencer crisis communication, establishing standards for transparency in influencer–organization partnerships during crises, and creating frameworks for protecting micro-influencers operating in high-risk situations.

In settings where crises are prolonged or recur cyclically, such as armed conflict zones or ongoing public health emergencies, organizations may consider investing in long-term partnerships with micro-influencers. This approach not only supports real-time communication during acute phases but also contributes to community engagement and preparedness over time. As research on disaster risk communication has shown, such continuity can contribute to resilience-building by fostering trusted information networks that persist beyond the crisis event itself (Houston et al., 2015).

The model also has implications for emergency response organizations and humanitarian agencies. These organizations could develop micro-influencer networks before crises occur, maintaining relationships with authentic voices in various communities who can be activated during emergencies. For instance, emergency response teams could work with local micro-influencers who understand community needs and can communicate critical information during natural disasters. Similarly, humanitarian organizations could partner with micro-influencers in conflict zones who can provide authentic perspectives while maintaining community trust.

Educational institutions and professional development programs should also consider the implications of the MIIM. Crisis communication training programs must incorporate modules on working with micro-influencers, understanding digital community dynamics, and managing authenticity in crises. Training modules should also include developing new skills for crisis communicators, such as micro-influencer relationship management, digital community engagement, and ethical partnership development.

However, we acknowledge that the MIIM may not be equally applicable across all crisis types, particularly in settings with limited digital infrastructure, strong state media dominance, or weak influencer ecosystems. Future empirical research should delineate the boundary conditions for the model's practical application.

These practical implications extend beyond immediate crisis response to long-term crisis preparedness and resilience building. Organizations and institutions must develop sustainable approaches to incorporating micro-influencers into their crisis communication ecosystems while upholding ethical standards and protecting the interests of both influencers and their communities.

5. Future Research Directions

The MIIM framework opens significant opportunities for advancing crisis communication research across several interconnected themes, each grounded in theoretical foundations and offering specific directions for scholarly investigation.

A primary research stream should focus on developing comprehensive typologies of micro-influencers in crises. Building on two-step flow theory and social presence theory, scholars need to investigate how different types of micro-influencers—whether directly affected actors, proximate observers, or external experts—vary in their communication effectiveness. Critical questions emerge about the optimal combination of characteristics (expertise, authenticity, community engagement) for different crisis contexts. The interaction between pre-crisis expertise and crisis-specific credibility is particularly intriguing, and how this relationship shapes message effectiveness. For instance, researchers might explore whether medical professional micro-influencers are more effective during health crises than during environmental disasters and what factors moderate this effectiveness.

The application of the MIIM across different crisis types presents another crucial research direction. Drawing on situational crisis communication theory, scholars should examine how micro-influencer dynamics vary across different types of crises, including geopolitical conflicts, environmental disasters, public health emergencies, and corporate crises. Such comparative analyses could reveal how crisis characteristics moderate the effectiveness of different communication strategies. Of particular interest is the distinction between sudden-onset and prolonged crises, as well as how successful micro-influencer strategies might differ. Studying diverse contexts could help develop a profound understanding of crisis-specific communication strategies.

The interaction between platform algorithms and micro-influencer content demands thorough investigation through the lens of network theory and information diffusion models. Researchers should investigate how social media algorithms influence content amplification and whether they inadvertently contribute to polarization in crisis situations. Critical questions arise regarding the optimization of algorithmic amplification to disseminate accurate crisis information while minimizing the spread of misinformation. This research becomes particularly relevant in politically sensitive crises where algorithmic amplification could significantly impact public discourse.

Drawing from social network theory and networked crisis communication theory, scholars should investigate how information ecosystems evolve around micro-influencers during crises. This includes examining how network positions affect the effectiveness of micro-influencers and how cross-platform dynamics influence message reach and impact. Temporal aspects deserve particular attention, including how the impact of micro-influencers varies across crisis phases and what factors determine the sustainability of their influence during prolonged crises. Understanding the evolution of audience–influencer relationships throughout the crisis duration could provide valuable insights for crisis communication planning.

Cultural dimensions theory and cross-cultural communication perspectives should guide research into how micro-influencers adapt crisis messages across cultural contexts. Scholars must examine how cultural factors influence the effectiveness of micro-influencers and how global narratives interact with local interpretations. Equally important are ethical considerations, drawing from media ethics and crisis communication ethics. Research should address what ethical frameworks should guide micro-influencer crisis communication, how organizations can balance authenticity requirements with crisis management needs, and what protections should be established for micro-influencers operating in high-risk situations.

Research must examine how emerging tools can enhance micro-influencer crisis communication as technology continues to evolve. Drawing on media richness theory and innovation diffusion theory, scholars should investigate how AI tools can enhance communication effectiveness, how blockchain technology can verify authenticity, and how

emerging technologies can reshape crisis communication practices. This forward-looking research stream becomes increasingly important as digital technologies continue to evolve.

These research directions should be pursued through a systematic program of investigation. Short-term priorities should focus on developing and validating micro-influencer typologies, as well as conducting comparative analyses across various types of crises. Medium-term priorities should address longitudinal studies of temporal effects and cross-cultural adaptation strategies. Long-term research priorities should examine patterns of crisis evolution and develop predictive models of micro-influencer effectiveness.

This comprehensive research agenda emerges directly from the MIIM's theoretical foundations while opening new avenues for scholarly investigation. By pursuing these interconnected research streams, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of micro-influencer dynamics in contemporary crisis communication while maintaining practical relevance for organizations and practitioners.

6. Conclusions

This paper presents the micro-influencer impact model (MIIM), a conceptual framework for understanding the role and impact of micro-influencers in crisis communication, with a particular focus on complex geopolitical situations, such as the Gaza conflict. As social media continues to reshape the landscape of information dissemination and public opinion formation, micro-influencers have emerged as significant actors in shaping narratives and responses during crises.

Looking to the future, the MIIM opens up numerous avenues for research. From developing micro-influencer typologies tailored to crisis contexts to examining the interaction between platform algorithms and micro-influencer content, there are rich opportunities for scholars to expand their understanding of these dynamics. The potential role of micro-influencers in public diplomacy efforts and the psychological impact on those who become key communicators during traumatic events are particularly intriguing areas for future investigation.

As we navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected global information ecosystem, the impact of micro-influencers in shaping the public understanding of crises, such as the Gaza conflict, will likely grow. The MIIM provides a robust conceptual foundation for understanding and leveraging this influence, offering insights that can contribute to more effective, ethical, and novel approaches to crisis communication.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

MIIM	Micro-influencer impact model
NCCT	Networked crisis communication theory

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