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Visualizing conflict: tracing aesthetic patterns in AI-generated images of the 2023 Israel-Hamas war

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While much discussion is focused on the relation between generative artificial intelligence and visual culture, its implications for journalism and public perception require a more in-depth critical examination. This study examines 28 AI-generated images created using DALL-E and DeepAI tools by addressing the ways artificial intelligence constructs visual narratives of the 2023 Israel-Hamas conflict. By employing a visual discourse analysis combined with social actor theory, this essay explores how civilians are represented, categorized, and positioned within digitally rendered conflict imagery. The study highlights how AI-generated imagery reproduces dominant tropes from traditional war photography while simultaneously reshaping them within new technological frameworks. The analysis reveals that the AI-generated visuals consistently foreground the civilian experience, particularly focusing on themes of destruction, resilience, motherhood, and childhood, while omitting direct representations of the primary political actors involved in the conflict. This pattern likely reflects the characteristics of the data used to train contemporary generative AI systems, including biases toward humanitarian imagery and constraints that discourage the depiction of identifiable political actors, thereby privileging emotionally resonant civilian narratives over politically explicit representations.

KEYWORDS

AI images, constructing conflict, DALL-E, DeepAI, visual discourse analysis

1 Introduction

Media, along with their publicly available material such as images, plays a significant role in shaping public understanding and emotional engagement, particularly during political conflicts. Specifically, images undoubtedly play a crucial role in helping audiences understand and interpret the context in which an event unfolds. Indeed, visual representations of conflict have long played a powerful role in shaping public understanding and opinion (Fahmy, 2005), and where the integration of synthetic visuals may blur the boundaries between real and AI-imagery. Also, images are used not only to illustrate events but to communicate journalistic news values such as negativity, impact, personalization, proximity, timeliness, and aesthetic appeal (Bednarek and Caple, 2017; Fahmy, 2005). These values, often embedded in visual semiotics, guide both editorial decisions and audience perception, embedding urgency, and emotional relevance in imagery (Papa and Theodosiou, 2026). What is at stake today is that the rapid development

of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has profoundly challenged the media landscape. As recent scholarly research has demonstrated, AI-generated visual content is often photorealistic and emotionally evocative, and thus difficult to distinguish from authentic photojournalism material (Chesney and Citron, 2019; Rini, 2020; Thomson and Thomas, 2023). As such, it raises urgent questions about authenticity, media credibility, and the potential for visual disinformation in times of political conflicts. This is highly relevant, in the context of the 2023 Israel— Hamas conflict where -a deeply polarized, mediated and politically sensitive event—images created narratives that shaped global perception (Zelizer, 2010; Perlmutter, 1998) around the conflict *per se*. However, as Perlmutter (1998) and Zelizer (2010) argue, images are always situated within specific socio-political contexts and discursive regimes that shape how they are selected, framed, circulated, and interpreted. Rather than offering unmediated access to reality, visual material becomes a site of contestation, mobilized in support of competing and often polarized narratives. Thus, the same image can function simultaneously as evidence, symbol, and rhetorical resource, acquiring divergent meanings across different audiences. This positions images as politically charged artifacts whose significance emerges through processes of contextualization, power relations, and interpretive struggle.

Concurrently, generative AI tools like DALL-E and DeepAI have attracted attention from scholars (Moran and Shaikh, 2022; Thomson et al., 2025), who have interrogated their AI-algorithmic powered capability to generate visuals for newsrooms. As AI tools begin producing hyper-realistic visuals, the criteria for what constitutes a “successful” news image may shift. Traditionally, success has been linked to an image’s ability to convey relevance, proximity, or human impact while conforming to professional and normative ideals within the newsrooms. However, aesthetic choices, such as color saturation and composition, also influence both audience perception and editorial decisions, particularly in formats like feature photography. Aitamurto (2019) illustrates how visual design contributes to perceived credibility and emotional presence, demonstrating that audiences may trust or engage with content not only because of what is shown, but how it is shown. Both DALL-E and DeepAI are text-to-image systems that generate realistic images from a given description written in natural language. Through a repeated process of adding and removing noise within the data, the model learns to create images based on verbal prompts inserted by users (Theodosiou et al., 2024). The penetration of AI into newsrooms has raised concerns about shifts in the normative values of visual journalism—particularly in war reporting, where access to active conflict zones is extremely limited or dangerous. In such contexts, AI-generated visuals can offer reconstructed representations of events that might otherwise remain invisible to the public, effectively turning algorithms into “eyewitnesses” of the context in question, though the visuals’ claim to reality always needs to be cautiously assessed.

Based on these observations, this study’s primary objective is to conduct a visual analysis of news images generated by AI and related to the Israel-Hamas conflict in 2023, focusing specifically on their aesthetic and semiotic characteristics. By examining how each type of image conveys meaning, emotion, and narrative, this research seeks to understand the impact of synthetic visual media on contemporary conflict reporting. Therefore, in our

research, particular attention is given to visual elements of the AI-generated images, such as composition, color, symbolism, realism, and iconography, as well as the underlying ideological or emotional messages embedded in the images (Barthes, 1977; Rose, 2016). Our contribution lies precisely in its potential to shed light on the ways AI-generated images may offer representations inspired by real-world events—particularly in emotionally charged or politically sensitive contexts (in line with Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Furthermore, by critically engaging with the visuals employed in AI-generated photographic images, this research contributes to the advancement of visual literacy and its connection with the current discussions around the influence of technologies. These insights are especially crucial at a time when the boundaries between fiction and reality are becoming progressively opaque, and when audiences are challenged to navigate a visually saturated media environment with discernment and skepticism (Livingstone, 2004; Manovich, 2020).

The study begins by outlining existing scholarship on AI-generated war imagery, then turns to the theoretical framework, methodology, and analysis, before concluding with key reflections.

2 AI-war imagery

Photojournalism has long been integral to documenting conflict reporting. Zelizer (2010) highlights that images of conflict are often more emotionally resonant than textual narratives, acting as instruments of memory, trauma, persuasion, and identity. In a similar vein, Perlmutter (1998) describes war photography as inherently ideological, shaped by the photographer’s perspective and the media’s editorial framing. For politically charged conflicts, visuals carry immense symbolic weight, often reinforcing narratives of victimhood, aggression, or resistance (Fahmy and Kim, 2008). The work of Hariman and Lucaites (2007) underscores the pivotal role that iconic images play in shaping public discourse and influencing collective memory. Rather than merely documenting events, images actively construct their meaning, becoming central to how societies remember and understand political crises, social struggles, and historical turning points. Iconic visuals function as rhetorical devices that frame interpretations, evoke emotional responses, and establish normative judgments. Consequently, any transformation in their production and circulation carries significant implications for the perception and understanding of conflicts by global audiences. As algorithmically generated visuals increasingly populate news feeds and online platforms, questions arise about authenticity, visual authority, and the potential reconfiguration of shared memory. This shift calls for critical scrutiny into the aesthetic and political power of synthetic imagery, particularly in contexts where visual representation shapes international awareness, empathy, and policy discourse.

The visual representation of conflict has long been a subject of scholarly interest, particularly as photography and visual media play an increasingly central role in shaping public consciousness and historical memory. Through the application of semiotic and multimodal frameworks, discussions interrogated how war iconography becomes a site of discourse where ideological, emotional, and political meanings converge. Lovelace (2010) explored the intersection of war photography, visual culture,

and meaning making. This study analyzed a selection of widely circulated photographs of the Vietnam War, treating them not simply as historical documentation but as cultural texts laden with symbolic, ideological, and emotional charge. Drawing on semiotic theory, it explored how these images have acquired emblematic status and shaped collective memory and public perception of the war. Similarly, [Mendelson and Smith \(2006\)](#) highlighted the central role of visual representation in shaping public perception and collective memory within political contexts. Through a semiotic and visual-cultural framework, the authors analyzed a range of representational forms including monuments, architectural styles, propaganda images, and official iconography, to study how emerging regimes articulate visions of unity, modernity, and power. [Machin \(2007\)](#) examined how media photographs from the occupation of Iraq construct and disseminate specific narratives about the war. The interplay of visual elements such as composition, color, and framing, and their role in conveying ideological messages were studied using a multimodal critical discourse analysis framework. The results indicated that these images often employ aesthetic strategies that sanitize or legitimize military actions, thereby shaping public perception and understanding of the conflict.

[Hoskins and O'Loughlin \(2010\)](#) introduced the term diffused war, where the mediation of conflict renders the relationships between actions and outcomes diffuse, creating greater uncertainty for policymakers. In this case, the depiction of conflict does not function solely as documentation, but as a dynamic process of meaning-making shaped by immediacy, repetition and emotional engagement. Through imagery, war is presented as something organized and controlled, so that it can be understood and managed, despite the violence and chaos that characterize it ([Mirzoeff, 2011](#)). More recent scholarship has advanced these debates by examining how conflict imagery circulates and acquires meaning within contemporary media ecosystems. Studies of recent conflicts in Syria ([Pantti, 2013](#); [Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017](#)), Ukraine ([Young and Omosun, 2025](#)), and Gaza ([Damanhoury and Saleh, 2025](#)) demonstrate how images of destruction and civilian suffering are strategically mobilized to evoke empathy, legitimize intervention, or reinforce nationalist narratives. These works highlight the moral and political stakes inherent in visual representations of war, highlighting how images function as tools of persuasion as well as records of violence.

Further contributions have drawn on multimodal and critical discourse approaches to analyze how the portrayal of conflict is reshaped on social media. [Alper \(2014\)](#) studied photographs of US troops in Afghanistan posted by photojournalists on Instagram and Hipstamatic. The article raises several issues that arise from the use of filters in relation to authorship and authenticity in contexts such as journalism. [Elmasry \(2025\)](#) used quantitative content analysis to study how popular Western broadcast media presented the Hamas-Israel conflict that began in October 2023. The analysis revealed that the media favored the perspectives and experiences of one side, highlighting its victimhood and legitimizing its use of violence, while marginalizing the voices, suffering, and political claims of the other side.

Similarly, [Kress and van Leeuwen \(2006\)](#) extended this discussion through their “grammar of visual design,” which

analyzed how compositional structures, including emphasis, context, and perspective, produce narrative effects. [Rose \(2016\)](#) further argues for a multimodal approach, combining semiotic, censorial, and psychoanalytic strategies to analyze how images function in different media contexts. AI-powered visual content creation can replicate reality without reference to a real event. A plethora of available tools such as DALL-E, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion have the potential to create hyperrealistic scenes that resemble photojournalism. [Manovich \(2020\)](#) has described this capability as the “aesthetics of AI,” where machine learning models develop visual styles based on learning from vast, biased datasets. As such, [Chesney and Citron \(2019\)](#) have referred to the era of “deepfake,” where synthetic media could be used maliciously to mislead, manipulate, or distort public discourse. Concerns extend beyond video to still images generated by AI, especially in conflict zones where disinformation can have devastating consequences.

[Rini \(2020\)](#) highlights the epistemic challenge of synthetic media and how we trust visual evidence when the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred. As a result, the power of an image to serve as evidence or testimony is undermined and the nature of journalism is altered. As synthetic images proliferate, the importance of media literacy becomes more urgent. [Livingstone \(2004\)](#) argues that the ability to critically analyze and interpret visual content is essential for navigating modern media ecosystems. [Wardle and Derakhshan \(2017\)](#) emphasize the role of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in shaping public opinion and stress the need for interdisciplinary approaches to combat information disorder. Viewers often rely on aesthetic cues such as image sharpness, lighting, or the expression of the subjects to judge their authenticity ([Paris and Donovan, 2019](#)). AI models are trained to reproduce these features, making the detection of synthetic images quite difficult. Recent studies ([Grinfeld et al., 2025](#)) indicate that viewers can experience genuine emotional responses and recall artificial images as authentic, despite being aware of their synthetic nature.

However, the rise of AI tools capable of generating images has brought to the forefront a range of concerns regarding how these systems are designed, trained, and employed to create visual content ([Sun et al., 2024](#)). In their analysis of generative AI visuals in journalism, [Thomson and Thomas \(2023\)](#) underscore the risk that such technologies may reinforce pre-existing biases and stereotypes—particularly those linked to gender, age, ethnicity, and geography within news narratives. Similarly, [Putland et al. \(2023\)](#) examined the ideological underpinnings of AI-generated imagery, focusing on portrayals of dementia. Their study revealed the persistence of dominant and reductive visual tropes, such as a biomedical framing, themes of loss, and representations of dementia as a “living death,” alongside a marked lack of diversity. These visual patterns were found to perpetuate emotional detachment and harmful biases, prompting the authors to call for more critical inquiry into the politics of AI-generated imagery. More recently, expanding on these discussions, [Westberg and Kvåle \(2025\)](#) investigated the semiotic dynamics of generative AI tools—specifically DALL-E—in shaping visual meaning. By analyzing images of teenagers, they identified four key visual logics: authenticating contextualization, conformist diversity, innovative surrealization, and promotional positivity. Their study offers a

nuanced critique of how generative imagery can simultaneously affirm and disrupt dominant visual discourses.

This raises pressing questions about government regulation, editorial responsibility, and the development of standards for the use of synthetic media in journalism (Brennen et al., 2020). Conflicts such as the Israel-Hamas war are deeply rooted in national, religious, and geopolitical narratives. The uncritical use or circulation of AI-generated imagery risks reinforcing prejudice and stereotypes or causing disinformation.

The existing literature highlights the unique power of visual media in reporting conflict and the semiotic mechanisms through which meaning is constructed. While AI-generated visual media can expand the aesthetic possibilities of visual storytelling, they also challenge fundamental journalistic norms related to authenticity, and truth-telling. A visual analysis of AI in the Israel-Hamas conflict in 2023 is therefore necessary not only to understand current media practices, but also to anticipate the evolving dynamics of visual narratives in future war conflicts. To examine these dynamics, semiotic analysis provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding how images convey meaning. Barthes' (1977) distinction between denotation (the literal or descriptive level) and connotation (the cultural or emotional associations) remains foundational in visual interpretation. Barthes (1977) contends that photographs are never neutral reflections of reality but are instead encoded with ideological meanings that guide perception. This semiotic approach is especially pertinent when analyzing AI-generated images.

3 Conceptual meaning of aesthetic embodiment, temporality, and ideology in the context of synthetic visual media

Our exploration begins with the influential *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, where Dufrenne (1973) interrogates the distinction between the aesthetic object and the object of use, emphasizing their fundamentally different modes of becoming. The utilitarian object, he argues, is shaped by a predetermined purpose and brought into being through mechanical production—an operation governed by efficiency, repetition, and control, which he characterizes as “naked intelligence”. Such objects make their guiding idea immediately legible, and their form rigidly serves function. In contrast, the aesthetic object emerges through a more open-ended process, shaped by inspiration, chance, and the temporal unfolding of creation. This distinction, grounded in mid-twentieth-century phenomenology, acquires renewed urgency in the age of generative AI. Today, tools such as DALL-E and DeepAI produce images that appear strikingly aesthetic yet are the result of algorithmic procedures that emulate aesthetic form through automated computation rather than manual or affective creation. These outputs challenge established notions of artistic genesis, replicating the surface features of aesthetic objects while lacking the embedded temporality, gesture, and intentionality that Dufrenne identifies as essential to aesthetic experience. As such, they compel us to reconsider whether computationally generated images can

truly inhabit the aesthetic realm—or whether they merely simulate its appearance within the logic of mechanical production.

The aesthetic image, as understood within phenomenological and art-theoretical traditions, is not defined merely by visual appeal, but by its capacity to evoke a distinct mode of perception, what Dufrenne terms an “aesthetic experience”, in which sensuous form and meaning are apprehended as a unified whole. Such experience demands a particular receptivity on the part of the viewer: an openness that is affective, contemplative, and temporally expansive. Dewey (1934), in *Art as Experience*, similarly emphasizes that the aesthetic arises not from the object alone but through the dynamic interaction between viewer and artwork, grounded in rhythm, continuity, and emotional resonance. Aesthetic images, then, are not static representations but perceptual events, configurations in which form becomes expressive, and significance unfolds through engagement. Jacques Rancière introduces a critical political dimension to this discourse, arguing that aesthetic form reconfigures the “distribution of the sensible” by reshaping what can be seen, said, and thought within a given perceptual regime or event (Rancière, 2004). He further elaborates in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* that “critical art is an art that aims to produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation,” underscoring the potential of aesthetic practices to disrupt entrenched modes of experience and catalyze new forms of awareness (Rancière, 2010).

Aesthetic experience, therefore, is never reducible to form alone. It arises from a dynamic interplay between appearance, perception, and meaning, unfolding through the tension between surface and depth, between immediate visibility and deferred understanding. Rancière's notion of the aesthetic as a disruption of the sensible draws attention to the potential of visual forms to unsettle habitual ways of seeing. In the context of this study, however, AI-generated war images rarely produce such disruption; instead, they tend to reproduce familiar visual hierarchies of suffering and visibility, limiting their capacity to reconfigure how conflict is perceived or understood. Han (2017), in *The Scent of Time*, brings this discourse into the present, arguing that in an age dominated by speed, transparency, and saturation, aesthetic experience is increasingly replaced by affective immediacy and spectacle. In this context, aesthetic form risks becoming hollow, transformed from an event of sensuous engagement into a mechanism of optimized visibility. What remains vital, then, is the capacity of aesthetic form to delay comprehension, to resist functional clarity, and to sustain a mode of looking that privileges duration, presence, and openness over efficiency or recognition. This understanding is crucial for analyzing AI-generated visuals in journalism, as it foregrounds how synthetic images may amplify spectacle while undermining the slower, reflective modes of seeing that traditional photojournalism aspires to cultivate—modes that invite viewers to pause, interpret, and grapple with the ethical and political stakes of what is shown. By contrast, AI-generated visuals often privilege immediacy and spectacle, potentially accelerating consumption at the expense of critical reflection.

This mode of aesthetic engagement is fundamentally embodied. As Merleau-Ponty (1945) argues in *Phenomenology of Perception*, perception is not a disembodied act of seeing but a bodily comportment toward the world, a mode of being that situates us within, rather than apart from, our environment. Perception, he

writes, reveals the world “not as an object or sum of objects, but as a permanent field or dimension of existence”. This ontological grounding of perception positions the aesthetic object not merely as a visual stimulus but as something that evokes tactile and kinaesthetic responses—what might be described as a felt presence. Such an understanding foregrounds the materiality of aesthetic form—its grain, texture, and rhythm—which resists abstraction and anchors meaning in the sensuous. Langer (1953), in *Feeling and Form*, complements this view by describing art as the creation of “virtual forms” that articulate patterns of feeling through expressive rather than representational structures. Together, these perspectives frame the aesthetic as a mode of encounter animated by perceptual and affective intensities. The aesthetic image, then, is not merely a conduit for information but a threshold where sensation and understanding converge, a site where meaning arises through the interplay of body and thought. The aesthetic image, then, is not merely a conduit for information but a threshold where sensation and understanding converge, a site where meaning arises through the interplay of body and thought. Seen through this lens, photojournalism and documentary photography cannot be understood solely as transparent windows onto events or as neutral vehicles of factual truth. While they undoubtedly carry indexical and evidentiary weight, their force lies in their capacity to produce virtual forms of experience: configurations of light, gesture, framing, and duration that shape how events are felt as much as how they are known. As Azoulay (2008) argues in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, documentary images operate as relational encounters among photographer, photographed subject, and viewer, activating a shared space of perception, responsibility, and response. A documentary photograph thus does not simply depict suffering, displacement, or protest; it structures an affective and ethical encounter in which viewers are positioned in relation to what is shown, mediating between the immediacy of lived reality and the reflective distance of interpretation.

In the context of AI-generated visuals, this theoretical grounding underscores the stakes of synthetic imagery: when aesthetic experience is reduced to spectacle or optimized visibility, the embodied, sensuous dimension of perception risks being flattened, transforming images from sites of encounter into mere surfaces of affective manipulation. This shift has particular consequences for conflict reporting, where access to the field is often dangerous or impossible, and where images have long played a central role in conveying not only the facts of war but also its human cost. In such contexts, AI-generated substitutes may amplify visibility, or conversely function as artificial and potentially misleading proxies for more grounded forms of representation, while simultaneously diminishing the embodied, ethical resonance that traditional war photography has historically sought to preserve.

Temporality is also intrinsic to aesthetic experience, shaping how viewers encounter images. For Agamben (1999), this involves a suspension—an interval where meaning hesitates—while Scarry (1999) frames it as an ethical demand that compels us to linger and attend to the other. This tension is central to our study, as AI-generated images in journalism risk collapsing reflection into instant affect, reshaping how conflict and crisis are perceived.

These observations on form, embodiment, temporality, and perception provide the foundation for examining how

contemporary images operate within a rapidly evolving visual culture. Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework is particularly instructive here, reminding us that images are never neutral but layered with meaning—denotative and connotative, symbolic and ideological. Color, realism, symbolism, and iconography thus become crucial sites where ideology is both encoded and contested. As algorithmic systems and generative models increasingly shape the production of images, the distinctions explored by Dufrenne, Rancière, Han, and others acquire renewed relevance. The aesthetic image—once grounded in gesture, materiality, and durational encounter—is now produced through automated processes that challenge both its ontological and experiential foundations. What is at stake is not merely the question of authorship, but the conditions under which an image becomes aesthetic: how it embodies time, engages the viewer’s body, and sustains the possibility of interpretation. In the domain of visual journalism, and especially in war reporting, these philosophical concerns become urgently practical: the question is not simply whether AI-generated images persuade aesthetically, but whether they preserve—or merely simulate—the structures of aesthetic experience and the normative values of journalism itself.

4 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative visual analysis to examine the aesthetics and semiotic features of AI-generated images. Drawing on semiotic theory (Barthes, 1977; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) and visual cultural analysis (Rose, 2016), it identifies recurring visual patterns, symbolic elements, and compositional techniques within the AI-war imagery. Through this method, we begin to look at how the participants, both soldiers and civilians are represented. The approach from social semiotics called “social actor analysis” (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2000; Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2005) allows us to systematically examine how soldiers, enemies and civilians are positioned for the viewer in the images. Overall, the aim is to uncover how these images convey ideological, emotional, or political meanings. By analyzing synthetic images side by side, the study reveals the visual codes and rhetorical strategies specific to each category.

4.1 Data collection

The collection of real images was initially based on 200 images from news articles published by *The Guardian* and *Al Jazeera* covering major events of the Hamas-Israel war for the period October 2023 -January 2024 (Table 1). The outlets were selected to ensure a diverse and balanced perspective by representing news organizations from distinct cultural contexts. Our aim is not to analyze the war itself, but to explore how it was visually presented as an unexpected event embedded in the media agenda between the selected time frame. From the initial image set, 28 images were chosen for the analysis using a structured week sampling method, which involved selecting specific days across multiple weeks to mitigate temporal reporting bias. Two fabricated weeks were created separately for *The Guardian* and *Al Jazeera*, with

TABLE 1 Summary of the key events occurring between October 2023 and January 2024 that selected for the real images collection.

Date	Key event
7 October 2023	Hamas launched “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” with rocket barrages and ground incursions into southern Israel. Around 1,200 Israelis killed and 250 taken hostage.
8 October 2023	Israel formally declared war, called up 300,000 reservists, and imposed a lockdown on the West Bank.
18 October 2023	President Biden visited Tel Aviv; planned Amman summit canceled after al-Ahli hospital bombing.
21 October 2023	Hamas released two American-Israeli hostages; first humanitarian aid trucks entered Gaza via Rafah.
28 October 2023	Israel began large-scale ground invasion in Gaza (Beit Hanoun, Bureij).
3 November 2023	Al-Qassam Brigades and other Palestinian groups attacked IDF forces in multiple areas.
9 November 2023	Israeli airstrike hit UNRWA shelter school; Israel agreed to daily 4-h humanitarian pauses.
14 November 2023	IDF raided Al-Shifa Hospital and interrogated staff; two humanitarian corridors opened for civilians.
19 November 2023	31 premature babies evacuated from Al-Shifa Hospital; Houthi rebels hijacked Israeli-linked ship in the Red Sea.
21 November 2023	Israel and Hamas agreed (mediated by Qatar, Egypt, and the U.S.) to a hostage-prisoner exchange and four-day ceasefire.
24 November 2023	Start of ceasefire: aid trucks entered Gaza and 24 hostages (13 Israelis, 10 Thais, 1 Filipino) were released.
25 November 2023	Hamas released 13 Israeli hostages and four Thai nationals after a delay of 7 h; Israel releases 39 Palestinian prisoners.
27 November 2023	Ceasefire extended by 2 days; Hamas released 11 Israeli hostages, Israel freed 33 Palestinian prisoners.
29 November 2023	Hamas released 16 hostages; Israel freed 30 prisoners; IDF killed three Palestinian gunmen who had broken the ceasefire.
3 December 2023	IDF expanded ground operations across all of Gaza; heavy bombing and renewed rocket fire on Tel Aviv.
12 December 2023	Israeli forces stormed Kamal Adwan Hospital, arrested staff; begun testing seawater flooding of Hamas tunnels.
21 December 2023	IDF completed operations in southern Gaza; UN reported over 500,000 Gazans starving, Hamas released video of dead captives.
14 January 2024	Gaza Health Ministry reported 125 Palestinians killed in 24 h; Netanyahu marked 100 days of war, defying ICJ case.
21 January 2024	178 Palestinians killed in 24 h; Tel Aviv protest demanding hostage release and new elections.

images selected so that each day they alternated between depictions with and without human subjects.

4.2 Research design

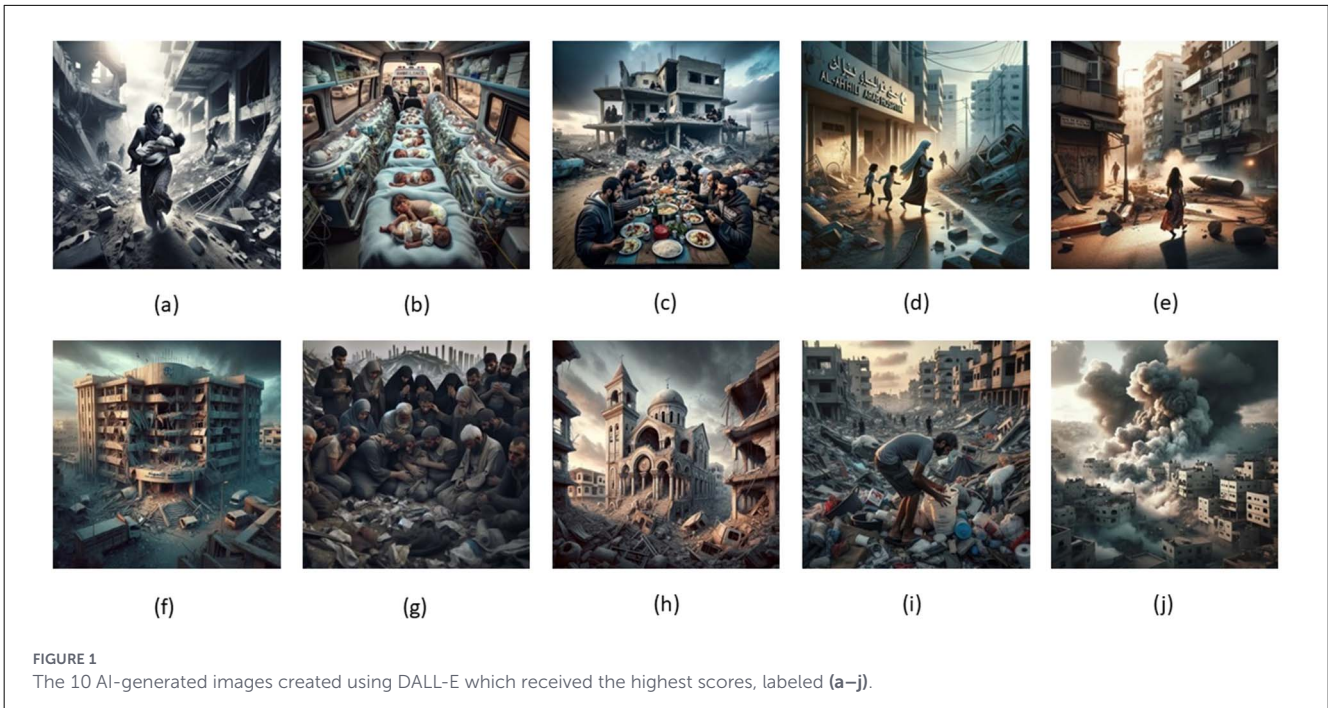
The captions of selected 28 images were then used as text prompts to create new visuals using DALL-E (<https://openai.com/dall-e-3>) and DeepAI (<https://deepai.org>). Each caption was used once per tool to create each image. This process produced new images that retained the thematic core of the originals. By repeating the image generation process, 28 illustrations were created from each tool.¹ The images were generated using the default settings of the respective AI image-generation tools. No stylistic parameters, presets, or sub-categories were manually selected or modified during image creation. Instead, images were produced solely by inputting the image captions as text prompts. Specifically, DALL-E images were generated via ChatGPT-4 with image-generation capabilities, using its default configuration without altering any style, quality, or rendering options. DeepAI images were similarly created using the platform’s default settings, without user intervention beyond the text prompt. In both cases, images were generated using paid accounts, ensuring full access to the standard image-generation functionality of each platform. This

approach was adopted to maintain consistency and replicability across tools while minimizing the influence of user-imposed stylistic bias.

The 56 AI images, along with the 28 real ones, were distributed into 14 questionnaires with the same structure. Each questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part collected demographic data (age, gender, education). The second part included 6 different images, 2 real, 2 DALL-E and 2 DeepAI randomly selected, and 8 questions related to realism, aesthetics, and impact. Of the 8 questions, 3 assessed the realism of the images, 2 focused on aesthetics, and three addressed perceived impact¹. The questions related to aesthetics and impact were developed based on the Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) framework (Papa and Theodosiou, 2026; Yu and Chen, 2023). The questionnaire was completed online by 178 Cypriot participants (120 female, 53 male, and 5 identifying as other genders), using the 1–5 likert scale. The questionnaires were randomly distributed ensuring that each questionnaire was answered by at least 11 participants. Then, the 10 images that received the highest average responses for each tool were selected for the visual analysis. The DALL-E images are shown in Figure 1, the DeepAI are shown in Figure 2, and the text prompts used to generate all images are provided in Table A1.

All participants were final-year journalism students, born between 1997 and 2002, and enrolled in undergraduate media and communication programs. This cohort was deliberately selected as it represents an emerging generation of media professionals who are highly digitally literate and actively engaged with AI technologies. Although not yet professional journalists, their

¹ AI-generated images, questionnaire items, and coding sheet used in this study are available for download upon request to the corresponding author.



perspectives offer valuable insight into how future practitioners may interpret and evaluate AI-produced visuals. Moreover, as members of Generation Z, their extensive exposure to digital tools places them at the forefront of shaping future journalistic practices and audience expectations.

The visual analysis was guided by a structured coding sheet (see text footnote 1) designed to capture both descriptive and interpretive dimensions of the images. The coding framework was organized into six analytical domains: (a) actors and participants, documenting who appears in the image and how they are

positioned (e.g., individual civilians, mothers with children, gaze and activity); (b) spatial and temporal settings, identifying environments, scale, and contextual cues; (c) visual cues and aesthetics, including color palette, contrast, composition, and symbolic lighting; (d) narrative frames, assessing how images construct meanings such as suffering, resilience, collectivity, or ideological tropes; (e) actor-surrounding interactions, examining how subjects relate to space, objects, and temporality; and (f) semiotic and ideological cues, capturing cultural markers, visual mythologies, and affective strategies.

This perspective guided our assessment of formal properties such as composition, color, lighting and visual style. Narrative approaches were employed to examine how images evoke temporality, causality and narrative coherence through implied actions, settings and figures. Social semiotics informed our analysis on how visual signs function culturally and ideologically, producing connotations, affective responses, and relations of power.

Each image was analyzed for compositional and symbolic features, with particular attention to color palette and tonal contrast, lighting and depth, facial expressions and body language (emotional tone), spatial arrangement and framing, symbolic elements (e.g., flags, ruins, weapons), and the degree of realism or surrealism. This framework allowed us to identify not only the visual strategies deployed in AI-generated images but also the ideological and affective dimensions that shape their journalistic significance.

Building on previous research that examined visual framing in war and conflict photography (e.g., Damanhoury and Saleh, 2025; Elmasry, 2025; Entman, 1993; Pantti, 2013; Pantti, 2019; Fahmy et al., 2014; Young and Omosun, 2025;), the analysis also drew on semiotic and multimodal theories of meaning-making (Barthes, 1977; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) and studies of visual memory and ethics in photojournalism (Chouliaraki, 2013; Sontag, 2003; Zelizer, 2010). Each image was examined through established narrative logics such as heroism, victimhood, threat, resistance, and suffering. In this study, narrative logics refer to recurring and culturally recognizable patterns through which visual elements are organized into meaningful storylines. Drawing on visual analysis traditions in media studies, narrative logics capture how images implicitly position actors, events, and emotions within simplified moral and relational structures. Rather than constituting complete narratives, these logics function as interpretive frameworks that shape how viewers are invited to make sense of a scene. During analysis, each image was examined for the presence and dominance of these logics, based on visual cues. Therefore, we coded the presence and interaction of key narrative elements including actors (soldiers, civilians, political figures), spatial and temporal settings (battlefields, ruins, domestic spaces), and visual cues such as color, lighting, gaze, and compositional focus. This approach enabled us to trace how meaning is constructed through the alignment of visual motifs with specific emotional and ideological narratives, revealing how synthetic imagery both reproduces and transforms the semiotic and affective codes of traditional photojournalism.

5 The narrative frames of AI-images

The images created by DALL-E (Figure 1) and DeepAI (Figure 2) capture the chaos and human experience during the conflicts between Hamas and Israel. They present scenes of destruction and its impact on people trying to survive. The presence of people within the chaotic environment highlights resilience and personal impacts of war as central narratives, highlighting the deep human cost and enduring strength required to survive in these environments.

5.1 Participants

Participants represented in the AI-generated images can be referred to as individuals, highlighting both individual and collective experiences, and struggles of people during the war. The way people are depicted in these images' highlights that behind the broader political and military narratives, there are real people enduring deep hardships. Both DALL-E (e.g., Figures 1a, d, e, i) and DeepAI images (e.g., Figures 2c, j) depict the civilians as individuals, personifying the impact of war and making the suffering and resilience of everyone more familiar to the audience. They include close-ups of individuals wandering through the rubble, with expressions that exude shock, anguish, but also determination to survive. The negative space and strong focal points emphasize the scale of the destruction and draw the viewer's attention to key points within the images. In contrast, images depicted in Figures 1b, c, g, i, 2b, e, h, i emphasize community and shared experiences in the face of adversity by presenting individuals in groups. This collective depiction underscores the idea of unity and mutual support among individuals in times of war. However, while these narratives appear to humanize suffering, they simultaneously reproduce familiar ideological codes of war imagery. In Barthes' terms (Barthes, 1977), the use of color, symbolism, and realism anchors meaning in recognizable tropes of anguish and resilience, which risks reducing complex experiences to simplified visual narratives. Thus, AI-generated war images may elicit empathy while simultaneously normalizing a limited repertoire of representations that shape how conflict is perceived and remembered. However, this empathy is primarily affective rather than epistemic, as it relies on familiar emotional cues and visual tropes rather than accurate and context-rich depictions of specific events or actors. As a result, audiences may empathize with a generalized and abstracted notion of suffering, raising challenges for journalism's normative commitments to truth-telling and ethical responsibility.

5.2 Participants' categorization

The images depict only the civilian population, omitting explicit reference to either side of the conflict. Indeed, the absence of identifiable actors depoliticizes the scene, framing war primarily as a humanitarian crisis rather than as a political and military process shaped by agency and responsibility. By foregrounding civilian suffering while omitting perpetrators or opposing sides, the images encourage emotional engagement but limit viewers' capacity to understand the causes, dynamics, and structures of the conflict. The two sides of the conflict, Hamas and Israel, appears indirectly through the destruction, fires and explosions that caused and created unfavorable living conditions for ordinary citizens. The civilians are culturally categorized as Palestinian men and women due to their clothing, which consists of thobes and hijabs. In some cases, the depicted are dressed in Western clothing. An exception is the woman depicted in Figure 2e, who is dressed in clothing that does not refer to the codes of the Middle East. Civilians are culturally

categorized through their fashion into lower socio-economic status, simplifying them into passive victims, stripped of political action or diversity. Furthermore, this is in full alignment with the presence of Gazans in journalistic images who tend to be represented as individuals who come from lower socio-economic groups (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2025). This is due to that many upper- and middle-class families have fled the Gaza Strip as well as the fact that war photographers usually have access to densely populated areas inhabited by working class citizens.

With pronounced focal points—whether human figures or devastated environments—these images guide viewers toward the core visual and emotional dimensions of the conflict. They include close-ups of individuals wandering through the ruins, with expressions that exude shock, anguish, but also determination to survive. The use of negative space and strong focal points emphasizes the scale of the destruction and draws the viewer's attention to key points within the images. The soft color palette, dominated by grays and browns, conveys a rather somber mood. The destruction is contrasted with bright spots (e.g., flames, highlights, etc.) accentuate dramatic moments and intense emotions of the depicted humans. The images evoke feelings of terror, pain and despair.

While these images vividly capture human suffering and resilience, they rely on recurring visual codes (such as clothing, color, negative space, and symbolic contrasts) that reproduce familiar ideological tropes of war photography. The images simulate high visual modality through photographic realism yet operate at a lower epistemic modality by privileging stylized and decontextualized representations over specific, situational detail. In particular, the use of negative space—often placing isolated civilian figures against blurred or empty backgrounds or positioning them as small elements within expansive fields of ruins or sky-heightens emotional intensity while abstracting the scene from concrete geopolitical context. This compositional strategy foregrounds vulnerability and universality but limits the images' capacity to convey causality, agency, or accountability.

In Barthes' terms, the denotative content (civilians in rubble, expressions of anguish) is inseparable from the connotative layer that encodes broader cultural meanings: Palestinians as passive victims, destruction as spectacle, hope framed through selective moments of light. Such representations risk reducing the complexity of lived experiences to a narrow repertoire of visual signs, thereby naturalizing certain ways of seeing conflict while silencing others. In this sense, AI-generated images do not simply reflect reality but participate in constructing an ideological narrative that aligns with, and potentially amplifies, the biases already embedded in journalistic depictions of war. By automating and scaling these familiar visual conventions, such images risk stabilizing moral framings of conflict, narrowing the range of imaginable perspectives and reinforcing dominant interpretations of who suffers, who is visible, and what counts as newsworthy violence. This dynamic is not just aesthetic but normative: by narrowing the range of representation to recognizable stereotypes, these images undermine journalism's responsibility to portray conflict truthfully and with nuance, reinforcing spectacle at the expense of diversity and ethical accuracy.

5.3 Actors and actions

Drawing on semiotic theory (Halliday, 1985), the images position civilians as goals within the representational process, portraying them as recipients of violence whose cities and homes have been devastated and whose loved ones have perished. The civilians are shown suffering amidst the ruins of war and mourning (i.e., Figures 1g, 2i). In addition, they are engaged in behavioral processes, such as collecting various objects from the rubble (i.e., Figures 1i, 2j), eating (i.e., Figures 1c, 2b), and walking in the ruins like Figures 1e, 2c, h, revealing their resilience and will to live. Although the two sides of the conflict shape the mental and behavioral states of the civilians, they are not visually presented as actors within the images. Instead, civilians appear as goals or reactors, positioned as the recipients of external actions rather than initiators of them. Their gestures and gazes reinforce this passivity: they do not engage directly with the spectator but are turned away—either to the left, signifying retrospection and reference to the past, or to the right, suggesting anticipation and a glimpse of the future (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002). This directional orientation encodes temporal meaning while at the same time conveys emotional distance, situating the viewer as an observer of suffering rather than a participant in it. Through such compositional strategies, the images construct civilians as both witnesses and victims, their subjectivity mediated through the broader visual grammar of conflict representation.

5.3.1 Motherhood

Among the images generated by the DALL-E tool, there are two images (Figures 1a, d) portray mothers with children, emphasizing their vulnerability and victimization within the context of war discourse (Martikainen and Sakki, 2021). The mothers are placed at the center of the composition, illuminated by a ray of light that symbolically conveys hope and transcendence amid devastation. At the same time, this illumination carries an uncanny quality characteristic of AI-generated imagery, where an artificial "glow" subtly detaches the figures from photographic realism. This effect reinforces the image's symbolic and affective charge while simultaneously signaling its synthetic nature. In both cases, they do not focus on their children but look toward the right side of the image—a posture associated, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2002), with the future and optimism. This directional gaze can be interpreted as a semiotic resource suggesting endurance and faith in survival despite loss. The mothers are depicted in motion, running, which underscores both the strength of maternal instinct and the physical urgency to protect and secure their children under any circumstances. Their dynamic posture contrasts with the static destruction surrounding them, reinforcing a visual tension between despair and resilience. They appear equal to the spectators, occupying the angle at eye level, thus more easily conveying their emotions and humanity (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). This eye-level perspective invites empathy and moral engagement, positioning the viewer not as a distant observer but as an implicit witness to their suffering and determination.

5.3.2 Childhood

Images of children were also generated from both AI tools which, according to previous studies, identify with the feelings of the viewers, gaining the audience's sensitivity (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; Šarić, 2022). Indeed, previous research has shown that images of refugee children—and often adults as well—tend to infantilize refugees, reducing them to passive subjects and reinforcing stereotypes that strip them of voice and agency (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; Martikainen and Sakki, 2021). In Figure 1b, a number of infants are shown sleeping in rows, conveying innocence to the viewer. This is reinforced by the light colors of the bed linen and onesies. In the same way, in Figure 2e the protection of the baby girl by professional nurses emphasizes innocence and the priority that should be given to vulnerable, fragile and innocent victims such as children.

While these visual narratives foreground motherhood and childhood as symbols of fragility, resilience, and hope, they also reproduce deeply anchored ideological codes of war representation. As Sontag (2003) argues, repeated depictions of suffering—particularly of women and children—form part of a visual economy of compassion that both invites empathy and risks aestheticizing pain. Such images, by eliciting immediate emotional responses, can desensitize viewers over time, transforming genuine engagement into habitual recognition. This framing, though effective in mobilizing empathy, risks simplifying complex realities into sentimental archetypes that privilege affect over nuance. In journalistic terms, such imagery may reinforce a limited repertoire of representation that sustains audience attention while narrowing the spectrum of truth-telling. For example, the recurring depiction of isolated, suffering children mobilizes strong moral appeal but reduces childhood to a symbol of passive innocence, detached from context, agency, or diversity. As Sontag (2003) reminds us, the ethical challenge lies not only in witnessing suffering but in resisting the comfort of familiar forms through which it is shown. In AI-generated war imagery, this repetition risks fixing childhood as an emblem of victimhood, limiting more complex and accountable representations.

5.4 Settings

The images show destroyed buildings, places of worship such as churches, and public infrastructure such as hospitals, along with scenes of people surviving amid rubble, the interior of ambulances, and the transportation and care of infants. The settings predominantly refer to urban areas, with the exception of Figures 2b, d, which depict rural environments, and Figure 1g, which remains spatially ambiguous. Although Figures 1d, f include inscriptions identifying buildings in the Gaza Strip, the images are characterized by low modality—their representational cues are insufficiently specific to establish a precise geographical reference, rendering them transferable to almost any Middle Eastern context. This low modality, as discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), diminishes the emphasis on documentary accuracy and shifts the viewer's attention from the setting to the human participants. The indeterminacy

of place contributes to a form of mythic universalization (Barthes, 1977), where suffering is abstracted from a concrete geopolitical reality and rearticulated as a generalized visual code of war. Consequently, the images evoke empathy not through factual recognition but through affective resonance, situating the viewer within a moral rather than informational framework (Zelizer, 2010). Therefore, AI-generated images encourage moral identification without geographic or political anchoring, limiting the viewer's capacity to relate empathy to concrete histories, responsibilities, and lived environments of war.

5.5 Color

DALL-E images are characterized by desaturated tones, low contrast, and muted colors. The predominantly low-saturation palette creates an environment that suggests destruction, mourning, and despair. These colors are indicative of war-torn or post-conflict settings. The near absence of intense hues highlights the suffering of the participants rather than aestheticizing the scene. The low modalism created by the soft color serves to enhance emotional gravity, evoking empathy and identification with the participants. The low contrast directs the viewer's attention to the facial expressions and postures of the participants, reinforcing the anthropocentric focus of the image (e.g., Figures 1g, i). On the other hand, DeepAI images have moderate saturation, medium brightness and strong contrast between foreground and background. In this case, the difference between survival and destruction becomes more apparent, provoking more critical thinking than emotional identification in viewers. They present the disruption of everyday life and resilience during war. For example, the contrast in Figure 2b makes the unbroken, colorful plates and food displaced in a disaster area more visually salient.

While these stylistic differences demonstrate how color and contrast shape affective and cognitive engagement, they also reproduce familiar codes of visual ideology. In Barthes' (1977) terms, muted palettes connote mourning, loss, and despair, while heightened contrasts dramatize survival and endurance against destruction. These connotative layers, far from neutral, operate as what Barthes calls mythologies—naturalized visual narratives that transform cultural and political meanings into seemingly universal emotions. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) argue, such semiotic resources function not only as aesthetic choices but as socially coded modes of communication that guide interpretation through shared visual grammars. Within this framework, color and tonal contrast become part of the affective economy of war imagery, mediating the viewer's emotional proximity to suffering. In journalistic and humanitarian contexts, these strategies risk privileging affective immediacy or spectacle over critical distance, reinforcing what Sontag (2003) describes as the ambivalent ethics of witnessing. Thus, AI-generated color schemes do not merely aestheticize war but actively participate in constructing its ideological and moral meaning, raising urgent questions about the responsibilities of visual journalism and algorithmic image-making to resist the repetition of reductive tropes and

to foster more nuanced, truthful, and diverse representations of conflict.

6 Conclusions

The analysis of images generated by DALL-E and DeepAI tools reveals how AI reconstructs the visual discursive narratives around the Israel–Hamas conflict. More specifically, this study has examined how AI-generated images of the 2023 Israel–Hamas conflict visually constructs narratives of war using visual text centric analysis focusing on the color, composition, symbolism, and representations of participants. While the analysis demonstrates that these images often achieve high aesthetic appeal—through balanced composition, vivid contrasts, or evocative use of light—they do so by mobilizing visual codes deeply entrenched in the history of war photojournalism. Although AI-generated images don't invent new ways of showing war from scratch or in abstract ways instead, they rely on recognizable visual frames that have long structured how war is depicted and represented in photojournalism news stories. Muted palettes signal mourning and despair, mothers and children symbolize innocence and victimhood, and close-ups of anguished faces invite empathy and identification. In this way, AI-generated images borrow heavily from the established repertoire of conflict imagery, producing visuals that feel immediately familiar while reinforcing conventional ways of seeing war. As argued already by Parry (2010) these images are an “invitation to pay attention” to the suffering of the other. Participants are depicted as individuals or groups in ways that foreground suffering, resilience, and unity, yet these portrayals frequently reproduce familiar tropes of anguish, victimhood, and innocence. The emphasis on mothers, children, and civilians echoes long-standing representational patterns that, while powerful in eliciting empathy, risk narrowing the spectrum of conflict imagery to sentimental archetypes. Thus, the AI-generated images reshape established narrative frames, highlighting the experience of civilians as a focal point. Through representations of individual and collective suffering, resilience, and survival, civilians are positioned as the primary subjects of the war, following an anthropocentric and rather affective visual narrative.

This representational pattern can be understood as a product of the sociotechnical logics that shape AI models. These models are trained on large-scale, publicly available visual datasets in which humanitarian images, particularly scenes of civilian suffering, motherhood, and childhood, tend to be overrepresented and highly salient. Furthermore, the content moderation and security policies typically embedded in such models often restrict the creation of identifiable political figures. Together, these factors appear to encourage a mode of representation that highlights emotional, universal human experiences while abstracting conflict from specific political actors and structures, resulting in a depoliticized visual context of war.

From a theoretical perspective, insights from Barthes, Rancière, Merleau-Ponty, and others illuminate the stakes of

this new aesthetic field. AI-generated war images do not merely document but actively encode meaning and representations through different ideological and symbolic layers. Their color palettes, spatial arrangements, and symbolic contrasts shape not only how conflict is seen but how it is remembered, reinforcing certain narratives while silencing others. In Barthesian terms, denotation and connotation intertwine to naturalize ideological readings: muted tones connote despair, bright contrasts dramatize survival, and maternal or child figures symbolize innocence and vulnerability. These signs are not neutral but participate in constructing a particular vision of war that aligns with cultural expectations rather than the full complexity of lived experience. This is evident, through the used visual grammar which consists of desaturated color palettes, strong focal points, and low modality in the case of DALL-E, and more intense contrast and moderate saturation in the case of DeepAI, guides the viewer toward different modes of interpretation. DALL-E images' aesthetic elements evoke empathy and identification, while DeepAI images' strong contrast invites more critical engagement. Both tools, however, highlight the emotional and symbolic weight of destruction, motherhood, and childhood, which are often mobilized in humanitarian and journalistic imagery to construct narratives of innocence, victimization, and moral urgency.

Similarly, cultural and socioeconomic cues—particularly clothing, setting, and environment—play a significant role in positioning participants as Palestinian civilians of lower socioeconomic status. These visual markers, such as modest dress, crowded living conditions, and deteriorating urban spaces, function as recognizable signs that invite viewers to read the figures through the lens of poverty and vulnerability. As Sontag (2003) observes, the repetition of such imagery within the visual economy of conflict creates a familiar iconography of suffering that transforms individuals into symbols rather than subjects. These visual conventions simplify complex social realities and reproduce reductive representations of the people of Gaza as passive victims; a pattern deeply embedded in the history of war photography and humanitarian media. Furthermore, the absence of direct representations of the warring parties displaces political responsibility from the visual field, positioning citizens as the primary targets of invisible violence. This aesthetic of absence evokes compassion while depoliticizing the scene, allowing empathy to emerge without engagement with the structural causes of suffering. What distinguishes AI-generated imagery, however, is the automation and repetition of this logic, transforming a longstanding representational tendency into a reproducible visual standard with cumulative consequences for journalistic meaning-making.

What emerges from this analysis has two caveats. Firstly, AI-generated imagery offers new opportunities for visualizing mostly inaccessible conflict zones where foreign journalists have been banned from entering Gaza independently since Israel launched its 2023 offensive following the Hamas 7 October attacks. It should be noted that these zones remain inaccessible, regardless of how many AI-generated images are produced. A small number have been taken into the Gaza Strip by Israeli troops under

controlled access. Therefore, AI can “imagine” representations where cameras cannot go. On the other, it risks aestheticizing and simplifying war in ways that undermine the very principles of journalistic integrity and dependency. The power of these images lies not only in what they show to the audience but in what they conceal: the selective reproduction of cultural codes, the erasure of political agency, and the reduction of war to recognizable tropes of suffering and resilience. Secondly, AI-generated images risk undermining one of the core values of war photography: temporality. While previous studies (Griffin, 2004) have shown that war imagery in the mainstream press is shaped by selectivity and framing, AI collapses this process into a false immediacy, producing visuals that appear instantaneous but lack the grounding of real-time witnessing. They may simulate empathy and humanize suffering, yet in doing so they normalize a limited repertoire of visual representations, reinforcing stereotypes of passive victimhood and spectacular destruction. This tension challenges journalism’s foundational values of truth-telling, diversity, and ethical responsibility. Moreover, within semiotic frameworks, AI-generated images convey meaning not only through what is depicted but also through compositional choices—such as gaze, posture, and spatial orientation—that construct temporal and emotional narratives (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). These formal elements guide the viewer’s affective response, suggesting endurance and humanity amid devastation. Yet, as Sontag (2003) reminds us, the aestheticization of suffering risks transforming resilience into spectacle, rendering pain visually compelling but politically neutral. In this sense, the semiotic construction of these images both celebrates the strength of those depicted and exposes the ethical tension inherent in representing trauma through visually seductive means. Ultimately, while the AI-generated imagery captures human perseverance within ruins, it also calls attention to how digital aesthetics can blur the boundary between empathy and consumption.

In conclusion, AI-generated war images should be understood not simply as technological innovations but as cultural artifacts embedded in a dominant transnational visual culture of conflict reporting, one shaped by journalistic humanitarian norms, platform aesthetics, and historically Western-centric ways of seeing war. For journalism, the challenge is therefore twofold: to harness the potential of AI for visual storytelling while resisting its tendency to reproduce spectacle at the expense of accuracy, diversity, objectivity and ethical consideration of the conflict *per se*. Only by critically engaging with the aesthetics and ideologies of synthetic imagery can we begin to understand its role in shaping collective memory, public perception, and the future of conflict reporting. Our study seems to contribute to an understanding of an emerging visual narrative of conflict representation, which reflects, analyzes, and reshapes journalistic norms. Using the Israel–Hamas conflict as a critical case, this study advances an understanding of an emerging, trans contextual visual narrative of conflict representation—one that reflects existing journalistic norms while reconfiguring how war is made visible, affectively legible, and normatively evaluated. While lacking the evidentiary power of photojournalism image, they nonetheless possess dialogic power, offering insight into how AI reproduces and reshapes narratives of war, suffering, and human resilience. This raises critical questions

about the authenticity, representation, and ethical dimensions of visual storytelling through AI’s role in conflict.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

ZT: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Methodology. VP: Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. GM: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Specifically, Generative AI was used to generate the images analyzed in this study. The images were produced using DALL-E (<https://openai.com/dall-e-3>) and DeepAI (<https://deepai.org>) based on the text prompts provided in Table A1.

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Appendix

TABLE A1 Text prompts used to generate AI images.

Image	Text prompt
Figure 1a	An injured woman carries a baby in the aftermath of Israeli bombing in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on 29 October.
Figure 1b	Premature babies who were evacuated from al-Shifa hospital lie in an ambulance in Rafah before they are transported for treatment.
Figure 1c	Palestinians eat outside, surrounded by destruction caused by Israeli air strikes in the village of Khuzaa, east of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip on November 27, 2023.
Figure 1d	Ibtihal al-Ra'i escaped the Israeli attack on October 17 at al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City with her children, and said she had to step over mutilated and burned body parts.
Figure 1e	A woman walks past the site where a rocket launched from the Gaza Strip landed in Tel Aviv.
Figure 1f	Scene of destruction at al-Ahli hospital.
Figure 1g	People mourn following the attack on the camp.
Figure 1h	Gaza City's Greek Orthodox church of Saint Porphyrius.
Figure 1i	A man collects belongings after overnight Israeli shelling in Gaza City.
Figure 1j	Smoke rises during an Israeli raid in Jenin refugee camp, occupied West Bank.
Figure 2a	Smoke rises following Israeli attacks in Gaza. The Palestinian Ministry of Health says at least one person has been killed in an Israeli air raid that hit the Indonesian Hospital in the northern Gaza Strip.
Figure 2b	Palestinians eat outside, surrounded by destruction caused by Israeli air strikes in the village of Khuzaa, east of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip.
Figure 2c	A woman walks past the site where a rocket launched from the Gaza Strip landed in Tel Aviv.
Figure 2d	Rockets are fired from Gaza City toward Israel.
Figure 2e	Medics transport premature babies to Egypt after they were evacuated from al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, which had been surrounded by Israeli forces, then searched and its staff, patients and displaced people interrogated.
Figure 2f	View of destroyed buildings in Gaza hit in Israeli strikes during the conflict, as seen from southern Israel.
Figure 2g	Scene of destruction at al-Ahli hospital.
Figure 2h	Neighbors, who woke up to what felt like a powerful earthquake, mill around the site where the Nisman home used to stand.
Figure 2i	People mourn following the attack on the camp.
Figure 2j	A man collects belongings after overnight Israeli shelling in Gaza City.