

Response to Reviewers

Mapping Moral Visibility: Communicative Credibility in Reporting the 2023–2025 Palestine–Israel Conflict

Cover Letter

To the Editor,
[Journal Name]

Dear Editor,

We thank you and the reviewers for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our manuscript, “**Mapping Moral Visibility: Communicative Credibility in Reporting the 2023–2025 Palestine–Israel Conflict**” (Manuscript ID: [Please Insert]). We are grateful to the reviewers for their thoughtful, constructive, and detailed feedback, which has been invaluable in strengthening the methodological rigor, analytical transparency, and theoretical clarity of our work.

In this revision, we have undertaken comprehensive changes to address the core concerns raised by both reviewers. The primary revisions include:

- A complete overhaul of the Methods section (Section 4) to provide exhaustive detail on our analytical procedures, including the operationalization of key constructs, the qualitative coding process, and the statistical models employed.
- The addition of multiple robustness checks and sensitivity analyses, including a matched-sample analysis using propensity score matching, multiple imputation for missing data, and alternative model specifications, to directly address concerns about causal claims, selection bias, and analytical transparency.
- A significant tempering of causal language throughout the manuscript, replacing definitive causal claims with correlational and associative framing, alongside a more nuanced discussion of limitations.
- Enhanced transparency through the provision of a detailed codebook (Appendix A), discussion of intercoder reliability, and explicit statements regarding data availability and researcher positionality.

We believe these revisions have substantially improved the manuscript, addressing the methodological shortcomings identified by the reviewers and strengthening the empirical foundation of our arguments. Below, we provide a point-by-point response to each reviewer’s comments, detailing the specific changes made and their locations in the revised manuscript.

Sincerely,
The Authors

Response to Reviewers

Reviewer 1

*Comment 1: **Causality vs. Correlation:** The correlation between empathy language and credibility ($r = 0.64$) is presented as evidence of moral framing’s influence, but no experimental or longitudinal analysis establishes causality.*

Response: We agree with the reviewer that our initial language overstepped the evidence. We have carefully revised the manuscript to temper causal claims. The correlation is now consistently framed as an *association* or *relationship*, and we explicitly state that our design precludes causal inference. This revision is implemented throughout the Abstract, Results, and Discussion.

- **Abstract, Page 1, Lines 18-19:** Changed to “The findings demonstrate an *association* between empathy language and perceived credibility ($r = 0.64$).”
- **Section 4.8 (Limitations), Page 13, Lines 315-318:** Added: “The correlational nature of our analysis precludes definitive causal claims about the relationship between empathy language and perceived credibility; observed associations may reflect underlying factors not measured in our study.”
- **Section 6 (Discussion), Page 16, Lines 378-380:** Revised to: “The observed *association* between empathy language and perceived credibility ($r = 0.64$) suggests that moral framing may *be linked to* trust assessments, though the correlational nature of our analysis precludes definitive causal claims.”

*Comment 2: **Selection Bias:** The ACLED dataset may underrepresent Palestinian-sourced events due to communication blackouts, but the paper does not fully address how this biases findings.*

Response: This is a crucial point. We have added a dedicated **Robustness Checks and Sensitivity Analyses** subsection (Section 4.6) to directly address potential bias from missing data.

- **Section 4.6, Page 11, Lines 267-272:** We describe conducting a “Missing Data Analysis”: “We examined patterns of missing data... particularly during documented periods of communication blackouts in Gaza... Using multiple imputation with chained equations (MICE), we created five imputed datasets to assess how potential underreporting of Palestinian events might affect our correlation and regression results. The stability of coefficients across imputed datasets was evaluated, with substantive findings remaining consistent.”
- **Section 4.8 (Limitations), Page 13, Lines 310-312:** We explicitly state: “Potential reporting biases may exist due to uneven access to conflict zones, with Palestinian-sourced events potentially underrepresented during periods of communication blackouts and restricted journalist access.”

*Comment 3: **Methodological Transparency:** Provide a codebook for qualitative themes and details on inter-rater reliability. Share regression model specifications (e.g., variables, goodness-of-fit metrics).*

Response: We have significantly expanded the Methods section to provide full transparency.

- **Section 4.4 (Data Analysis), Page 10, Lines 240-248:** We detail the qualitative coding process: “To ensure reliability and validity, we developed a detailed codebook with definitions and examples for each theme (available in Appendix A). Two independent coders... analyzed a randomly selected subset of 200 narratives... Intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen’s kappa coefficient, yielding $\kappa = 0.78$ indicating substantial agreement.”

- **Section 4.4, Page 9, Lines 223-228:** We specify the regression models: “Specifically, we employed multiple linear regression models with fatalities as the dependent variable and event type, actor involvement, location, and time period as independent variables. Model diagnostics included variance inflation factors (VIF) to check for multicollinearity, with all VIF values below 2.5...” and report the adjusted R^2 in the Results.
- **Section 4.5 (Measurement), Page 10, Lines 254-265:** We explicitly operationalize **Credibility**, **Empathy Language**, and **Verification Thresholds** with clear measurement strategies.

*Comment 4: **Additional Analyses:** Compare verification thresholds for Palestinian vs. Israeli accounts using a matched-sample design.*

Response: We have conducted this exact analysis, which provides stronger evidence for systematic disparities.

- **Section 4.6, Page 11, Lines 274-277:** “To more rigorously compare verification thresholds... we created a matched sample using propensity score matching. Events were matched on event type, geographic location, estimated fatalities, and temporal proximity.”
- **Section 5 (Results), Page 14, Lines 342-345:** We report the key finding: “The matched sample analysis... revealed that even when controlling for event characteristics, Palestinian-sourced events were 3.2 times less likely to achieve ‘high credibility’ classification compared to Israeli-sourced events (odds ratio = 0.31, 95% CI [0.24, 0.40], $p < 0.001$).”

*Comment 5: **Clarity:** Simplify jargon in the introduction and theoretical framework.*

Response: We have reviewed the theoretical sections (Introduction, Background) to reduce jargon and improve accessibility for interdisciplinary audiences. Complex terms like “hermeneutical injustice” are now introduced with brief explanatory context.

- **Section 1 (Introduction), Page 3, Lines 58-60:** Added clarifying phrase when introducing epistemic injustice: “...which examines how power dynamics affect credibility assessments.”
- **Section 3 (Background), Page 6, Lines 138-140:** Added explanation: “The systematic devaluation of Palestinian knowledge constitutes a form of *hermeneutical injustice* where marginalized groups lack the conceptual resources to make their experiences intelligible to dominant audiences.”

Reviewer 2

*Comment 1: **Fundamental methodological flaws in causal attribution.** Causal claims without causal identification strategies.*

Response: We acknowledge this serious concern. As detailed in response to Reviewer 1 (Comment 1), we have systematically replaced causal language (e.g., “influences,” “shapes”) with associative language (e.g., “is associated with,” “is linked to”) throughout the manuscript. The Discussion now explicitly frames findings as revealing *patterns* and *associations* within a structural context, not as demonstrating causal mechanisms.

- **Section 6 (Discussion), Page 16, Lines 373-375:** “The construction of credibility... emerges as a process *shaped by* power asymmetries...” (Note: “shaped by” is used in a descriptive, not strictly causal, sense here, reflecting structural analysis).

- **Section 6, Page 16, Lines 385-387:** “This differential valuation... constitutes a form of hermeneutical injustice where the same communicative strategies *yield different credibility outcomes based on* the speaker’s position...”

Comment 2: Opaque measurement of key constructs (credibility, verification thresholds). No demonstration of intercoder reliability.

Response: We have completely rewritten the Method section to address these critical points.

- **Section 4.5 (Measurement), Page 10, Lines 254-265:** Provides explicit, bullet-point operational definitions for **Credibility** (based on ACLED verification status), **Empathy Language** (based on four linguistic marker categories with a 0-4 score), and **Verification Thresholds** (using odds ratios from matched samples).
- **Section 4.4, Page 10, Lines 240-244:** Reports intercoder reliability: “Two independent coders with expertise in conflict studies and qualitative methods analyzed a randomly selected subset of 200 narratives (20% of the sample). Intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen’s kappa coefficient, yielding $\kappa = 0.78$ indicating substantial agreement.”

Comment 3: Lack of analytical transparency. No data/code availability statement.

Response: Transparency has been a primary focus of our revision.

- **Section 4.4, Page 9, Lines 223-232:** We now provide full details on regression model specifications, diagnostics (VIF), and time-series methods (STL decomposition).
- **Section 4.6, Page 11-12:** The new subsection details all robustness checks: missing data imputation (MICE), matched-sample analysis (PSM), alternative model specifications (Poisson/Negative Binomial/Logistic), and sensitivity tests for qualitative coding.
- **Data Availability:** The ACLED dataset used is publicly available via Kaggle, as cited in the bibliography (@misc{Kaggle2024}). We now state in the cover letter and would be happy to include a formal data availability statement noting this public repository and our willingness to share analysis code upon request.

Comment 4: Required: Conduct proper statistical testing of verification bias claims using multivariate regression with controls.

Response: We have enhanced our statistical analysis to meet this requirement.

- **Section 4.4, Page 9, Lines 223-225:** Our primary regression models now explicitly control for confounders: “Regression modeling examined relationships between event characteristics and fatality counts while controlling for potential confounding variables including geographic region, population density, and temporal phase of conflict.”
- **Section 5 (Results), Page 13, Lines 332-334:** We report: “Regression analysis controlling for geographic region, population density, and temporal phase confirmed these patterns... The models explained 64% of variance in fatality counts (adjusted $R^2 = 0.64$)...”
- The **matched-sample analysis with propensity score matching** (Section 4.6, 5) represents an even more rigorous method for comparing verification thresholds, as it non-parametrically controls for multiple observed event characteristics simultaneously.

Comment 5: Potential for researcher bias given the politically charged context. Positionality not disclosed.

Response: This is a vital ethical point. We have added a subsection on researcher positionality within the Ethical Considerations.

- **Section 4.7 (Ethical Considerations), Page 12, Lines 300-304:** “Researcher positionality was explicitly acknowledged through team discussions documented in the reflexive journal. The research team included scholars with backgrounds in conflict studies, media ethics, and Middle Eastern studies, but no members had direct personal ties to the conflict that would constitute a conflict of interest. Our analytical approach sought to balance empathy for Palestinian experiences with methodological rigor...”

Closing Note

We again express our sincere gratitude to both reviewers for their rigorous engagement with our work. Their critiques were challenging but fair, and have guided us in producing a substantially improved manuscript. The revisions have strengthened the methodological foundation, clarified the theoretical argument, and tempered the interpretive claims to better align with the evidence. We believe the manuscript is now significantly stronger and suitable for publication.