Unexpected Voices: How Cultural Agents Reshape Political Communication*

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Abstract

Digital media has transformed how citizens encounter politics, often through incidental exposure in ostensibly apolitical spaces. Prior research emphasizes *content drift*, where political information enters non-political spaces through algorithms or social networks. We theorize a different pathway—*actor drift*—where cultural figures embed political messages into their routine output, transforming audience perceptions. Analyzing millions of Instagram posts and comments from chef-influencers before and after the onset of the Israel–Hamas war, we show that identity-proximate chefs integrated political commentary into their culinary posts, which drew higher engagement but triggered disengagement from loyal followers. These dynamics capture a core tension: politicization extends the reach of cultural agents while eroding the parasocial trust that made them influential. Actor drift complicates theories of selective exposure, bypassing self-selection yet producing backlash that both disrupts and reinforces echo chambers.

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Introduction

How do people encounter politics when so few actively seek out political information? A well-known answer holds that much political exposure happens as a by-product of non-political activities unrelated to civic engagement (Downs 1957). People come across political information not by seeking it out, but while engaged in other pursuits such as reading the sports section, watching entertainment television, or stopping for gas. This insight—that political encounters are often serendipitous—remains central to our understanding of how the public engages with politics (Baum 2003; Prior 2007; Tewksbury, Weaver and Maddex 2001; Zaller 1992). As the media environment has evolved, the scale and character of these encounters have only expanded. In today's digital world, political content is no longer confined to news broadcasts or broadsheets. It is scattered across social media feeds, embedded in memes, threaded through celebrity posts, and, increasingly, delivered by messengers who do not appear political at all.

Research on incidental news exposure has flourished in this new media environment, documenting how citizens come across political information unintentionally, while scrolling for entertainment or checking in with friends (see Schäfer 2023 for a review). Much of this work focuses on what might be labeled content drift: political messages appearing in non-political digital spaces due to algorithmic curation, virality, or social sharing (Carlson 2024; Settle 2018; Wojcieszak et al. 2024). Scholars have linked these chance encounters to meaningful changes in knowledge, engagement, and civic participation (Feezell 2018; Feezell and Ortiz 2019; Nanz and Matthes 2020; Scharkow et al. 2020; Weeks, Lane and Hahn 2022; Kim, Chen and Gil de Zúñiga 2013). But this literature largely assumes that the identity of the source remains familiar and stable. Even as this political content crosses contextual boundaries, it originates with politicians, journalists, or politically-oriented friends and family. What happens when the source itself transforms—that is, when figures once understood as apolitical begin to speak politically?

This paper characterizes a different kind of dynamic in incidental exposure: one that originates not in the message but in the speaker. We label this phenomenon *actor drift*: moments when figures once seen as apolitical—chefs, dancers, musicians, beauty influencers—suddenly claim a political voice. While scholars have examined political activism by celebrities,[1] we focus on a broader and increasingly salient phenomenon in the digital age: the politicization of content creators whose relationships with followers are more intimate, interactive, and parasocial than traditional celebrity-fan dynamics. Unlike celebrities who command attention through fame, these influencers cultivate trust through sustained, everyday engagement—sharing recipes, makeup tutorials, or workout routines. When they turn political, they do so from within carefully nurtured parasocial relationships, making their political speech both more unexpected and potentially more consequential.

We seek to distinguish actor drift as a distinct channel through which incidental political information can be transmitted and which might generate different audience response patterns. Unlike content drift, which describes political messages appearing in unexpected places, actor drift describes political

[1] See, for example, studies on celebrity activism such as Budabin and Richey (2021); Majic (2023).

messages emerging from unexpected voices. When a food influencer posts about war or a gamer on Twitch about racial justice, audiences encounter more than an unusual message: they confront a transformation in the speaker's identity. And with that shift come distinct consequences: people interpret political messages not only by what is said, but by who says it, and whether that speaker is seen as crossing a line.

We examine this phenomenon using the case of chef-influencers on Instagram during the sudden escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict on October 7, 2023. This choice is intentional: cuisine is often closely tied to local, ethnic, or national identities, but it is also not explicitly political. Rather, these influencers typically act as cultural ambassadors, introducing a global audience of followers to relatable culinary content that helps define and humanize their community.[2] These social media creators, primarily known for sharing recipes and culinary tips, became sudden and unexpected conduits for political speech following October 7. Drawing on a novel dataset of millions of Instagram posts and comments from months before and after the outbreak of the conflict, we trace how previously apolitical chefs, especially those with ethnic or national ties to the region, began integrating political language, hashtags, and imagery into their culinary content. The abrupt start of conflict generated an extraordinary shift: during the month following October 7, 39% of posts by Israeli chefs and 78% of posts by Palestinian chefs contained political discussion related to the conflict.[3] This behavioral shift offers a vivid instance of source transformation—a moment when identity, crisis, and platform incentives converged to repurpose cultural figures as political messengers, revealing how cultural linkages can transform into political activism in times of conflict.

We then analyze how two distinct audiences responded to this transformation: new followers who engaged with an account only after the conflict began and loyal followers who were active participants prior to the conflict and corresponding shift in content. These two audiences illustrate distinct pathways of incidental exposure and, in turn, distinct response patterns. Many new followers are plausibly brought to these chef-influencers by content drift—exposure to an account's political content via algorithmic choices or shares by other accounts they follow. Loyal followers, on the other hand, experienced actor drift: a substantial shift in a closely-followed account's messaging, away from culinary discussion and toward political information. While we cannot directly observe the psychological mechanisms behind follower reactions, we track behavioral indicators of engagement and disengagement.

We find that political content posted by previously apolitical culinary accounts generated significantly higher levels of attention compared to typical recipe posts. This increase in engagement was remarkably pronounced for Palestinian chefs in our dataset; their posts received a 360% increase in likes and 560% increase in comments following October 7.[4] Politicization brought an extraordinary number of new participants to these chefs' accounts,[5] expanding and diversifying their audiences while

[2] This form of cultural transmission can influence political outcomes without requiring explicit political communication from the actor involved. See, for example, the effect of footballer Mohamed Salah in reducing Islamophobia (Alrababa'h et al. 2021).

[3] During the month preceding, 1% of Israeli chef posts and 10% of Palestinian chef posts contained political content.

[4] For Palestinian chefs, the average likes per post increased from 3572 before October 7 to 12867 after. For comments, the per post average increased from 73 before October 7 to 413 after.

[5] Across all Palestinian chefs, the number of unique commenters increased roughly six-fold following October 7; for Israeli chefs, the number of unique commenters nearly doubled.

amplifying the reach of their content.

Yet this amplification was concentrated among the accounts' new followers. For loyal followers, account politicization led to a notable decline in interaction, measured by their rate of commenting on a chef's posts. Among the most active followers before the conflict,[6] the probability of commenting on a Palestinian chef's post declined from 14% before October 7 to 3% after. Israeli chefs also experienced a decline in engagement among loyal followers, from 19% before October 7 to 12% after. The magnitude of the drop-off in commenting increased with the degree of politicization engaged in by each chef's account. These patterns reveal a clear trade-off: the potential to reach new and broader audiences comes at the cost of alienating and fragmenting existing ones. Content drift broadens the spread of political messages—but mostly among audiences already open to politics.[7] Actor drift, by contrast, risks losing the very followers who turned to these figures to escape politics. Though the emphasis here is on chef-influencers, we might expect similar dynamics of politicization and audience response from influencers in other cultural arenas such as music (Hintz 2021) or sports (Alrababa'h et al. 2021).

These findings advance theories of political communication by highlighting the relational foundations of political legitimacy. Actor drift is distinctive not simply because apolitical figures speak, but because they do so from within parasocial relationships built in non-political contexts. The credibility and intimacy cultivated through everyday cultural content become the basis on which political speech is evaluated. As a result, when cultural figures enter politics, audiences reevaluate not only the message but the messenger, producing outcomes that range from trust transfer and mobilization to backlash and withdrawal. Actor drift thus expands existing accounts of opinion leadership and source credibility by showing how civic voices can emerge outside formal institutions, rooted less in expertise than in personal narrative and affective connection.

At the same time, our results underscore how audiences themselves enforce the boundaries of political legitimacy. Cultural influencers who attract audiences precisely because they do not push an overt political agenda face a dilemma when they adopt civic speech: while some users respond with heightened engagement, others disengage entirely. Actor drift therefore does not simply broaden political communication; it re-sorts audiences, deepening divides between the politically attentive and those seeking to avoid politics. This dynamic complicates optimistic accounts of incidental exposure and raises new questions about selective avoidance, echo chambers, and the resilience of shared civic spaces.

Last but not least, this dynamic poses a paradox for political elites. Parties and campaigns increasingly seek to recruit cultural influencers to reach disengaged publics, but is this strategy effective, and under what conditions? The influencers presumed to be most effective are often those whose political voices are newest and still perceived as authentic and largely apolitical. Yet once such figures become more overtly political, do they risk alienating parts of their audience? Actor drift may extend the reach of politics even as it destabilizes its messengers, raising deeper questions about how fragile political

[6] We define loyal followers as those who commented on at least 8 unique posts from a given chef account.
[7] See, for example, Derksen and Guess (2025).

communication becomes when trust resides less in journalists and politicians than in cultural figures.

From Content Drift to Actor Drift: Rethinking Incidental Exposure

The rise of digital media has fundamentally altered both the scale and character of news exposure (Anspach 2017; Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015; Chadwick 2017; Feezell 2018). While traditional media environments created predictable boundaries between political and non-political content—the news section versus sports, public affairs programming versus entertainment—digital platforms collapse these distinctions. On social media, political content flows freely through feeds designed for entertainment, embedded between personal updates, memes, and commercial content (Schäfer 2023; Settle 2018; Thorson and Wells 2016). Though the by-product learning model has been studied for decades (Downs 1957; Baum 2003; Prior 2007), the transformation of the media ecosystem has prompted a flourishing literature on incidental exposure.

Incidental exposure in digital environments can take many forms (Weeks and Lane 2020), but scholarship has largely concentrated on one mechanism in particular—what we term *content drift*: the appearance of political information where it is neither expected nor intentionally sought (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015; Carlson 2024; Kim, Chen and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Weeks, Lane and Hahn 2022; Wojcieszak et al. 2024). Consider a few familiar cases. Someone watching workout tutorials might stumble across a clip from a political rally; a person scrolling through vacation photos may run into a friend's shared article about the tariff war; or a viral video of police violence could spread on a platform otherwise dominated by dance challenges. In each instance, political messages surface amid entertainment, lifestyle, or social interaction—inserted through algorithmic curation, peer sharing, or platform design. Crucially, the disruption comes from placement rather than source: a *New York Times* article drifting into a Facebook feed is still a news story, and a presidential campaign clip on TikTok is still a political ad.

However, many of today's most prominent and polarizing episodes of digital politics suggest a different pathway for incidental exposure—one in which audiences encounter politics because a messenger they usually turn to for entertainment unexpectedly delivers overtly political messages. For instance, in 2024, millions of subscribers to the lifestyle and relationship podcast *Call Her Daddy* suddenly found themselves listening to a conversation about the US election when the host interviewed Vice President Kamala Harris (Murray 2024)[8]. Viewers of Twitch personalities like HasanAbi and Pokimane, who first built their communities around gaming streams, encountered live political commentary woven into the same spaces they once treated as pure entertainment. For some, this produced engagement and new political curiosity; for others, it sparked resentment at what felt like an intrusion. What unites these cases is not simply the appearance of political content, but the politicization of figures whom audiences did not initially expect—or necessarily want—to be political.

[8]Similar dynamics appear globally: In Australia, lifestyle podcaster Abbie Chatfield interviewed Prime Minister Anthony Albanese during the 2022 election, sparking both praise for mobilizing young voters and criticism that triggered an Electoral Commission inquiry (Butler 2025).

We label the increasingly common transformation of cultural figures into political messengers *actor drift*. Unlike content drift, actor drift occurs when individuals with primarily apolitical authority begin systematically incorporating political content into their regular cultural output. A lifestyle influencer who transitions from purely fashion content to regularly posting election commentary alongside product reviews, or a cooking YouTuber who begins integrating policy discussions into recipe tutorials, typify this phenomenon. Importantly, actor drift does not refer to activists expanding into cultural influence, politicians crossing into entertainment, media figures who were always political but unnoticed, or one-off political statements.[9] Rather, it denotes sustained shifts in which cultural authority becomes a vehicle for political messaging.

Distinguishing between actor drift and content drift is both substantively and methodologically essential for understanding incidental exposure and its political implications. Studies of content drift suggest that such encounters can increase political knowledge and engagement, though their effects are typically short-lived, often estimated in survey–experimental settings (Feezell 2018; Feezell and Ortiz 2019; Nanz and Matthes 2020; Kim, Chen and Gil de Zúñiga 2013) or measured with a self-reported survey (Weeks et al. 2017).[10] Actor drift, by contrast, involves a transformation of the source itself. When cultural figures come to be recognized as political messengers, this reclassification can reshape audience composition over the long term, politicize entire cultural domains, and infuse them with partisan meaning. These dynamics make actor drift a potentially powerful force in contemporary media life. Yet they also pose a challenge: depending on how audiences relate to cultural figures, politicization rarely unfolds neutrally or uniformly. In the next section, we turn to these audience reactions to show how parasocial ties can shape the dynamics of actor drift.

Parasocial Politics and the Challenges of Studying Actor Drift

Actor drift is disruptive not only because of what is said but because of who says it, making parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional connections with media figures (Horton and Wohl 1956; Hoffner and Bond 2022; Perse and Rubin 1989)—central to understanding its effects. Such bonds are not new: they have long formed around celebrities, television personalities, and even fictional characters (Giles 2002; Liebers and Schramm 2019; Kim and Patterson Jr 2025). What distinguishes today's digital creators is the intensity and routine of these ties. Through livestreams, v-logs, Q&A sessions, and personal storytelling, creators weave elements of their daily lives into their content (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2017; Ferchaud et al. 2018; Rasmussen 2018; Yuan and Lou 2020). Over time, these repeated interactions foster intimacy, reciprocity, and trust (Giles 2002; Hasell and Chinn 2023; Riedl et al. 2021). Actor drift matters in this context because politicization disrupts not just information flow but the expectations embedded in these relationships.

When parasocial relationships are cultivated primarily through non-political content, actor drift

[9] For instance, many celebrity-related studies investigate the impact of one-off political endorsement, such as celebrities' Twitter posts during the 2016 U.S. election (Zilinsky et al. 2020) or Oprah Winfrey's support for Barack Obama (Garthwaite and Moore 2013; Pease and Brewer 2008).
[10] Weeks et al. (2017) asks respondents "In the past month, how often have you accidentally encountered information online that..."

forces audiences to reevaluate the messenger themselves. Some followers may transfer the trust, intimacy, or expertise earned in apolitical contexts into the political sphere—increasing their engagement, mobilizing, or at a minimum maintaining baseline interaction. By contrast, others may interpret politicization as a breach of the implicit contract of entertainment content. Backlash can take two forms: outright rejection of the stance, or withdrawal even among those who agree if they perceive politics as intruding into a space once expected to remain apolitical. What was once a safe space for recipes or makeup tutorials may suddenly feel like another arena of political conflict, destabilizing the bond itself.

Digital content creators represent a particularly vivid case of this dynamic. Unlike celebrities or journalists, their authority derives less from institutional credentials than from cultivated authenticity and perceived intimacy with followers (Hund 2023). These very features heighten both their persuasive potential and their vulnerability: the credibility earned in apolitical domains can render political speech especially influential, yet the same intimacy makes any perceived breach of expectations more jarring. Repeated political expression can gradually reclassify these figures as political actors, transforming cultural spaces once understood as apolitical.

Existing theoretical frameworks in public opinion formation cannot adequately account for these dynamics. Classic models of opinion leadership in political science focus on actors who are already political—elected officials, union leaders, or community organizers—whose influence stems from superior political knowledge or institutional standing (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Roch 2005). Theories of source credibility similarly treat expertise and trustworthiness as relatively fixed, assuming that credibility operates within a stable domain of knowledge. These approaches are ill-equipped to explain how authority cultivated in apolitical contexts—such as fitness instruction or culinary expertise—can migrate into the political sphere, or why such migrations may provoke backlash when they violate the implicit contract of parasocial relationships. As a result, the reclassification of apolitical creators into political actors remains undertheorized.

Part of the reason this gap persists is that actor drift is difficult to study empirically. Unlike conventional political communication, which tends to unfold in formal or institutional settings, actor drift occurs in everyday cultural contexts and often becomes visible only when creators shift unexpectedly. Measuring such dynamics poses serious methodological challenges. Even under ordinary circumstances, media exposure is notoriously difficult to capture (Bartels 1993; Nagler 2017; Prior 2009; Watts, Rothschild and Mobius 2021), and identifying when people encounter political information unintentionally has long seemed nearly impossible. Early work in communication relied on interviews, telephone diaries, or laboratory settings (Purcell et al. 2010; Tewksbury, Weaver and Maddex 2001; Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2010), but these approaches ultimately fell back on surveys to approximate this elusive concept.

The advent of behavioral data promised a way forward. Digital trace evidence allows scholars to infer incidental exposure by tracing clickstreams from social media or search engines to news sites (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2020; Stier et al. 2022). Yet because of data constraints, most of this work

has centered on content drift. Granular browsing histories can reveal whether a user encountered a political article in a news feed, clicked it, and was redirected to a news outlet. Actor drift, by contrast, rarely unfolds through such formal channels. Its significance lies not in a single exposure event but in the relational history between speaker and audience: the disruption matters uniquely because of the parasocial ties built up over time. This dimension makes actor drift especially difficult to capture with one-shot survey experiments, short-term field experiments, or cross-sectional social media metrics, all of which struggle to identify whether a political message is coming from a long-familiar figure or a stranger. Moreover, because actor drift occurs at the level of the influencer, it is challenging to assess effects beyond individual high-profile cases.[11]

Studying actor drift systematically therefore requires naturalistic cases where politicization is visible across a population of culturally salient, previously apolitical figures, and where shifts in content and audience response can be traced over time. The next section turns to an illustrative case that fits these criteria.

Politicization of Chef-Influencers and Geopolitical Crisis in the Middle East

We examine a case that generated unusually visible and consequential instances of actor drift: the escalation of the Israeli–Hamas conflict in October 2023. The conflict's sudden and unexpected outbreak, moral intensity, and global visibility created powerful pressures for public figures with personal or community ties to the region to take political stands—often in spaces previously devoted to apolitical content. Among these were culinary influencers, whose audiences had long engaged with them for recipes, cooking tips, and cultural storytelling. In the immediate aftermath of the start of conflict and during the weeks following, these figures began to integrate political statements, calls to action, and advocacy into their feeds. Because they combined intimate parasocial bonds with their audiences, domain authority rooted in food culture rather than politics, and strong identity-based connections to the crisis, they offer a rare opportunity to observe actor drift as it unfolds in real time.

The conflict phase we examine in this study began on October 7th, 2023 with the surprise incursion of Hamas militants from the occupied Gaza strip into Israeli territory. During this attack, nearly 1200 individuals were killed and more than 200 were taken hostage. This attack took the Israeli defense system by surprise and resulted in the deadliest day in the country's history to date. The Israeli military subsequently began a heavy bombing campaign and ground invasion of Gaza to defeat Hamas; an estimated 10,000 Palestinians were killed in the first month of conflict.[12] As of this writing, the conflict is ongoing: Israeli troops remain on the ground in Gaza, more than 70% of buildings in the territory have been damaged or destroyed, more than 60,000 Palestinians have been killed, and an estimated 90% of the Gaza population is internally displaced.[13] While the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has deep

[11] For example, in 2023, Taylor Swift exhorted her followers to register to vote—yet a broader study of celebrity vote registration messages is complicated by the varying timing of such appeals. https://www.npr.org/2023/09/22/1201183160/taylor-swift-instagram-voter-registration

[12] See https://www.npr.org/2023/11/06/1210831466/death-toll-gaza-israel-hamas-conflict

[13] See https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-3-september-2025. Refugee estimates from UNHCR data.

historical roots, the October 7th attack's unanticipated nature and the severity of the response made this a uniquely visible and morally charged event.

The Israel-Hamas war commanded intense and polarized media attention, with traditional news outlets and digital platforms covering the conflict from divergent perspectives. Western media, such as CNN and BBC, largely framed the events around Israel's right to self-defense, focusing on the unprecedented nature of the October 7th attack and the toll on Israeli civilians. In contrast, outlets like Al Jazeera emphasized the catastrophic humanitarian impact of Israel's military response in Gaza, highlighting civilian casualties, widespread displacement, and the destruction of infrastructure. These differing narratives mirrored the geopolitical divides in international reactions to the conflict, with some governments expressing unequivocal support for Israel and others condemning the scale of its response. The polarized coverage underscored the global complexities of the conflict and the difficulty of crafting a unified media narrative.

What distinguishes this moment is how a broader spectrum of cultural figures, including social media influencers, artists, and niche content creators who otherwise are not engaged in overt political speech, felt compelled to respond.[14] Some cited personal ties to the region; others were pushed by their audiences; still others acted out of a perceived moral obligation to take a stand. Influencers with ties to Jewish or Palestinian communities often offered especially personal and emotionally resonant posts, sharing community reflections, appeals for peace, or firsthand accounts of suffering. Figure 1 offers an illustrative case of how a Palestinian chef-influencer's content changed before and after the conflict (see Appendix B for more examples). In June 2023 (left panel), the chef posted a lighthearted photo of a falafel sandwich with a descriptive caption. In April 2024 (right panel), following months of war, the chef posted a nearly identical photo of the same dish, but this time invoking Palestinian cultural identity and explicitly connecting the image to food scarcity and loss of life in Gaza. Two posts that appeared visually similar were recontextualized: a familiar image reframed as political expression. For long-time followers, the shift was not in the content itself, but in what it now meant. The post quickly spread, this time drawing comments that focused on genocide and political activism rather than culinary topics. This change captures the essence of actor drift: the disruption is in the perceived politicization of the messenger.

The widespread engagement of cultural figures demonstrates how the Israel–Hamas war extended into domains of public discourse that typically avoid political commentary. Of course, established celebrities such as Gal Gadot drew on established symbolic capital to speak out, consistent with patterns documented in research on celebrity politics (Budabin and Richey 2021). Influencers, by contrast, operate through direct, ongoing interaction with followers, building trust and authority in niche apolitical domains. When these influencers engage politically, the shift may carry a different weight: for long-time followers, it represents not just a public statement but a redefinition of a familiar relationship. In other words, chef-influencers who blend cultural identity and political crisis in their messaging provide a remarkably apt case for examining both actor drift and content drift. We study not only what

[14] See, for example, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/02/business/social-media-israel-hamas-conflict.html.



'Sabah el kheir from Palestine. Falafel anyone? Creamy houmous, piping hot Falafel, tomatoes, pickled cucumber, fruity green chilli and fiery red shatta!'



'Remember when you eat a Falafel, remember where it comes from, remember that we are a people, just like everyone else, with a food tradition[...]remember to celebrate Palestinian food in those dark moments, where Palestinians in Gaza are denied food, have lost their homes, their kitchens, are being subjected to a genocide[...]remember that this genocide, this occupation have to end...'

Figure 1: Instagram pictures and captions from the same account in April 2023 (left panel) and April 2024 (right panel).

prompts cultural figures to engage politically and how their established audiences respond, but also how algorithmic amplification introduces new audiences who encounter these figures for the first time through political content. Together, these dynamics create new channels of information dissemination.

Data and Methods

We examine these dynamics using data from culinary content producers active on Instagram, gathering posts and accompanying comments from before and after the October 7 attack.[15] We began data collection by identifying accounts owned by chefs or cookbook authors or those that primarily post content related to food.[16] We primarily focused on identifying Instagram accounts owned by individuals with a link to the conflict: that is, accounts owned by *Israeli* or *Palestinian* chefs, whether located within the geographic region or living in the global diaspora.[17] We collected accounts using a form of snowball sampling: first, we found the accounts of well-known Israeli and Palestinian chefs (including cookbook authors, famous restaurateurs, or television personalities). We then used their account content to identify collaborators or associates who also fit our criteria. Finally, we conducted a broad search for accounts which used targeted hashtags such as #israelifood or posted about culturally-specific foods or meals such as chicken *musakhan* or *Shabbat* dinner. Israeli and Palestinian affiliations were verified using information in the account biography and posts, including self-identification, language (e.g. account content in Hebrew or Arabic), and use of the Palestinian or Israeli flag.

[15] Full details on content analysis are described in Appendix C.
[16] We further restrict our focus to accounts that were created prior to October 2023.
[17] Identifying the primary location of account owners is possible in some cases using the information in the account bio. Using this information, we estimate that for Israeli chefs, about half are located in or near Israel and half in the global diaspora; for Palestinian chefs, our estimate is that around 30% are located in the Palestinian Territories and 70% in the diaspora.

We used a similar approach to collect and label two additional categories of culinary accounts: *MENA* and *General*. The first comprises Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) chefs: those located in or representing an affiliation with MENA countries, excluding Palestine. The second includes a broad class of chef accounts with a similarly culinary orientation but with a focus on any other global category of cuisine. The latter two categories were intended to collect contextualizing information on the degree to which conflict-related information was broadcast by a potentially sympathetic but not directly involved group (MENA chefs), as well as on general social media trends during the relevant time period (General). Overall, we identified 617 unique chef accounts (see Table 1). The accounts comprise a mix of industry professionals—restaurateurs, celebrity chefs, recipe developers and cookbook authors—as well as amateur cooks and influencers. We refer to all account holders as "chefs."

After we identified and categorized account handles, we collected information on all Instagram posts generated by these chefs from April 2023 through April 2024, an effective bandwidth of six months around the outbreak of conflict starting in October 2023. The data include information about each post (the date posted, caption, and type of content) as well as the response it received from the audience of social media users (the number of likes, comments, and, in the case of videos, views). We also collected all comments left on each post, including information on the commenter's username, the date of posting, the comment's text, and the number of likes it received. In total, we gather 111,319 Instagram posts and more than 8.5 million comments.

In addition to the post metadata and audience engagement, we develop content metrics for the post caption and for all audience comments.[18] We first identify posts that reference the Israel-Palestine conflict. To do so, we use a combination of approaches. First, we employ a dictionary-based approach using a set of targeted hashtags that specifically reference the conflict (e.g. #bringthemhome in reference to the Israeli hostages, or #freepalestine). Next, we utilize a word2vec model[19] trained on our dataset to build a dictionary of additional topically relevant terms using seed words with high specificity to the conflict (such as "hostages" or "genocide"). Finally, we use an LLM (OpenAI's *gpt-4o-2024-08-06* model) to identify captions that are about the conflict and express a pro-Israel or pro-Palestine stance. Our primary measure of political content classifies as political posts that are positively coded by at least one of these approaches. Collectively, these three approaches correctly classify the vast majority of posts; the estimated Type I error rate for our political content measure is 4% and Type II is 1%.[20] The different coding methods are also closely aligned: the LLM-based coding has a 0.825 correlation with the dictionary-based methods. We also assess negative, positive, and net sentiment metrics using the Bing sentiment lexicon, which we use in supplementary analyses in Appendix D.

We develop similar measures for the comments. We use the dictionary-based coding approach (hashtags and word2vec terms) to classify comments as political. We identify comment sentiment,

[18] A more detailed description of content analysis is in Appendix C.
[19] https://code.google.com/archive/p/word2vec/
[20] We estimate this using a randomly selected stratified sample of 200 posts that we hand-code for content.

again using the Bing lexicon in addition to emoji classification.[21] Finally, we construct a measure of whether the commenter further disseminated the post message—that is, whether they shared it with one or more additional accounts.

Data collection took place between April and June 2024. The primary limitation of our data is temporal: they reflect only one point in time, representing a snapshot of social media accounts when they were accessed. Chef account data are therefore available only as cross-sectional measures, which prevents us from tracking high-level metrics such as follower counts over time. On the other hand, account activity and resulting audience engagement offer analogous cross-temporal metrics: if an account receives an increasing number of likes per post, we would expect this to correspond to an increase in its number of followers.

In addition, we only collect the posts and comments that were publicly visible at the time of data collection. Instagram is a moderated social media platform, and content that violates community guidelines[22] may be removed by human or AI moderators, sometimes following community reporting.[23] Because we did not continuously collect posts and comments, our data likely omit some posts or forms of engagement that violated guidelines (such as hate speech, use of graphic images of violence, etc.). We also do not have access to temporary content.[24] In other words, our data comprise posts and engagement that fall within community guidelines and that remained available at the time of data collection. However, because inflammatory speech subject to removal is likely to touch on political topics, we expect that, if anything, the data we collect will underestimate political discussion in chefs' postings and comments among commenters.

Table 1 reports descriptive information for pre- and post-conflict activity by group for the 617 chef accounts within our sample. While the median Israeli, Palestinian, and MENA chefs showed similar pre-conflict levels of activity and engagement, the median chef in the General category was more active and had considerably more audience engagement. This is plausibly due to "oversampling" of the preceding categories: we made a concerted effort to identify as many popular Israeli and Palestinian chef accounts as possible. For the comparison groups, the objective was to gather a roughly comparable number of accounts using similar search techniques. Collectively, the chefs in the General category represent a small sample of the vast universe of all culinary content producers and relatively fewer low-engagement accounts relative to our Israeli and Palestinian groups. However, the goal of including these accounts is simply to benchmark variation in activity with Israeli and Palestinian accounts and to address any general time trends on social media, so we do not expect the higher level of activity to pose a serious threat to inference.

In the subsequent section, we report key outcome measures across group and time, taking advantage of the fact that the Hamas attack on October 7th represents a generally unanticipated event shock. We

[21] Social media comments are often comprised primarily or exclusively of emoji reactions. We develop a list of positive emojis (including hearts and smiling faces) and negative emojis (including sad or angry faces).
[22] See more information https://about.instagram.com/blog/spark/announcements/instagram-community-guidelines-faqs
[23] The majority of Instagram's removed posts (an estimated 86%) are removed without being first reported. See Dailey, Malena. "Content Moderation by the Numbers." *NetChoice*. Accessible at https://netchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Content-Moderation-By-The-Numbers-v5.pdf.
[24] Instagram allows accounts to share others' posts as "stories," which appear in a separate follower feed for a limited time.

Table 1: Instagram Data Summary by Category: Pre vs Post Attack Comparison

Metric	General		Israeli		MENA		Palestinian	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Account & Content Metrics								
Accounts	165	165	170	169	170	166	112	108
Posts	22,660	29,007	11,142	11,339	11,135	12,170	5,269	8,597
Videos	10,195	14,415	6,542	7,421	7,216	8,110	3,912	6,259
Photos	6,355	7,145	2,470	2,254	1,819	1,999	729	1,563
Stories	6,110	7,447	2,130	1,664	2,100	2,061	628	775
Account Metrics								
Avg. posts per account	137	176	66	67	66	73	47	80
Content Type								
Posts with hashtags (%)	83	83	69	68	85	84	72	50
Avg. number of hashtags	13	13	8	7	13	13	8	4
Posts with emojis (%)	27	28	21	21	35	39	24	15
Engagement Metrics								
Avg. likes per post	4,507	5,184	1,900	1,606	3,783	5,066	3,572	12,867
Median likes per post	636	759	189	198	372	454	236	1,896
Avg. comments per post	63	98	47	80	76	111	73	413
Median comments per post	16	15	14	17	19	24	15	51
Avg. video views	92,897	122,258	56,904	45,225	88,338	117,952	52,692	127,336
Total unique commentators	521,930	1,135,492	181,386	341,773	265,446	502,825	134,997	849,332
Avg. commentators per account	3,163	6,882	1,067	2,047	1,580	3,066	1,205	8,013

are therefore able to examine the distinct behavior of chefs before and after the onset of conflict.

Supply-Side Response: Uneven Drift

We first examine how chef-influencers shifted their content during the Israel–Hamas conflict. Figure 2 reveals striking patterns of politicization that varied dramatically by chef identity. The top panel shows the proportion of posts (by group and week) containing political content, as assessed by the aggregate measure described in the preceding section. Palestinian chefs underwent the most radical transformation. Before the wake of the conflict, only 9% of their posts contained political content—already higher than other groups, but still a small minority of their output. The outbreak of conflict triggered an extraordinary reversal: political content surged to nearly 80% of posts in the immediate aftermath. Even more remarkably, this was not a temporary spike—over the entire six-month period following October 7, 58% of all Palestinian chef posts addressed the conflict. This represents a fundamental reorientation of these accounts from culinary to political platforms.

Israeli chefs also underwent a sharp politicization. In the week of the Hamas attack, roughly 50% of their posts referenced the conflict. Over the subsequent six months, 17% of their posts included political content—an elevenfold increase from the pre-conflict period, when only 1.5% of posts were political. Although less sustained than the shift among Palestinian chefs, this change still represents a major departure from their typical content. The sustained nature of these shifts is particularly striking given that many chefs in both groups reside in the diaspora, far from the physical conflict. Their transformation reveals how deeply identity and cultural affiliation shape political expression even at geographic distance.

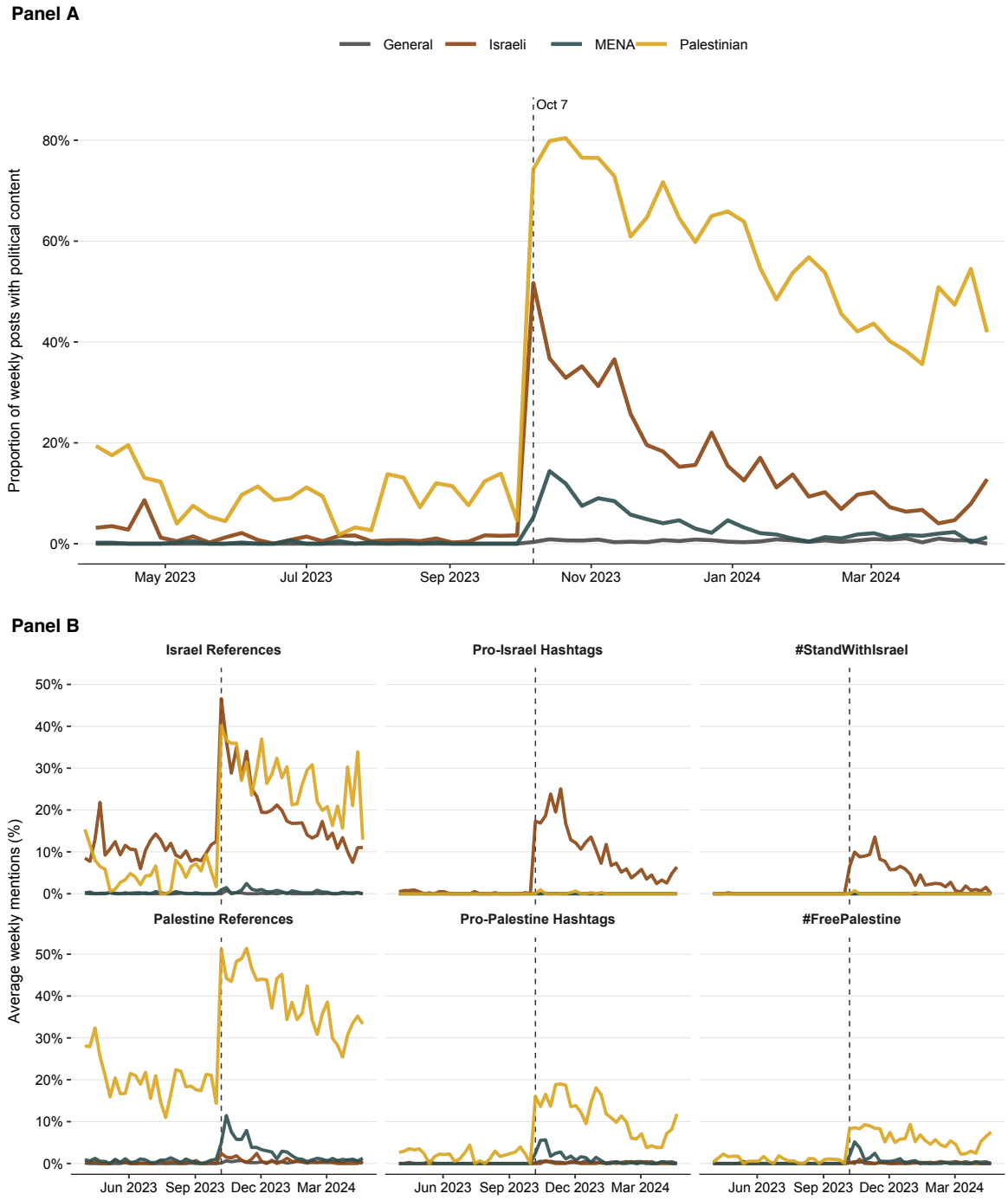


Figure 2: Shifting Content of Instagram Postings after October 7, 2023. Figure reports proportion of posts, grouped by category and week, that contain political content referencing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (top panel) or that contain the specific keyword or hashtag references indicated (bottom panel).

Importantly, we note that these shifts were not merely artifacts of increased posting activity. While Palestinian chefs exhibited a moderate but sustained increase in posting—from 1.8 to 2.6 posts per week—Israeli chefs showed no meaningful change in volume (see Appendix D.1). The transformation, rather, was qualitative: a clear increase in the proportion of posts containing political content, particularly among chefs with direct identity ties to the conflict. Nor was this change driven by audience demands. As Appendix Figure D.2 shows, the vast majority of Palestinian and Israeli chefs who politicized did so immediately after October 7, with many accounts posting political content within days. This rapid activation suggests an expressive response to crisis rather than a gradual, audience-driven process. Consistent with this interpretation, explicit demands for political content were rare in pre-conflict comments, and when they did appear, they primarily targeted celebrity chefs with no direct connection to the conflict.[25]

The contrast with other groups sharpens our understanding of when actor drift occurs. MENA chefs, who share regional but not national ties to the conflict, showed only modest change—political content rose from under 1% to 3% of posts. General chefs, lacking any cultural connection to the region, showed no change at all. The pattern of change—from radical transformation among those with direct identity ties, to modest change among regional neighbors, to stasis among the culturally distant—indicates that actor drift in this context is fundamentally identity-driven. Politicization emerged not from exposure to global events per se, but from the collision of personal identity with political crisis.

A crucial dimension of politicization lies not only in its frequency but in its framing. The bottom panel of Figure 2 shows the prevalence of posts referencing or expressing support for Israel (top row) or Palestine (bottom row), by group and over time. These references include direct mentions of national actors (dictionary-based coding for Israel and Palestine word stems), use of politically aligned hashtags,[26] or specific phrases such as "free Palestine" and "stand with Israel." While both Palestinian and Israeli chefs frequently mentioned Israel, Israeli chefs rarely used pro-Palestinian language, and Palestinian chefs avoided pro-Israel framing. Among non-aligned groups, political references remained sparse, though MENA chefs leaned somewhat more toward pro-Palestinian hashtags when they did engage. These asymmetries underscore that identity shaped not only whether chefs politicized, but also the content and direction of their expression.

Understanding shifts at the individual account level is equally important, since aggregate post-level measures may obscure whether change reflects a few highly political chefs or a broader transformation. Figure 3 addresses this by showing the number of accounts in each group that remained apolitical, became lightly politicized (fewer than 20% of posts containing political content), or shifted into high politicization (more than 20%). The results mirror the post-level patterns: whereas only about one-third of Israeli and Palestinian chefs posted occasional political messages before October 7, many previously apolitical accounts began posting political content afterward, often at sustained levels.[27] By

[25] For example, celebrity chefs Gordon Ramsay and Bobby Flay each attracted a number of pro-Palestine or pro-Israel comments on apolitical posts in October 2023.

[26] These are identified using author-coded lists of commonly used hashtags related to the content. For example, pro-Israel hashtags include #bringthemhome (in reference to the hostages taken by Hamas) and #hamasisisis; pro-Palestine hashtags include #ceasefirenow and #cookforpalestine.

[27] Appendix Figure D.3 explores the persistence of this politicization, showing that many accounts continued to post political content months after the

contrast, most MENA and general chefs remained apolitical, with only scattered exceptions. These account-level dynamics demonstrate that the shifts were not driven by a small minority of outliers but reflected widespread reorientation within identity-linked groups.[28]

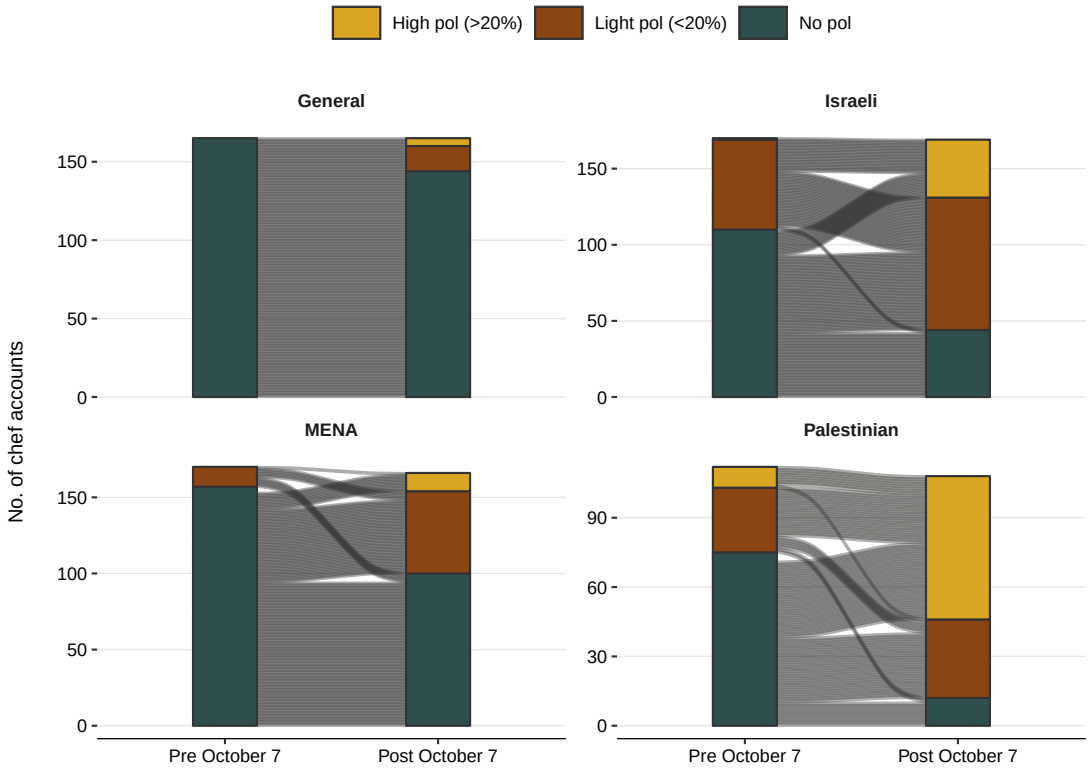


Figure 3: Content politicization at the chef-account level. Figure reports the number of individual chef accounts by category that posted political content before and after October 7. Light politicization ($< 20\%$) and high politicization ($\geq 20\%$) identify the proportion of the account posts during the period in question that contain political content.

Together, these patterns provide clear evidence of actor drift on the supply side: cultural figures who once appeared apolitical suddenly reoriented their content toward politics in ways structured by identity. The volume, tone, and account-level scope of these changes, especially among Palestinian and Israeli chefs, show how personal identity colliding with political crisis can transform cultural actors into visible political messengers.

Demand-Side Response: Audience Expands but Loyal Followers Withdraw

Having established that the Israel–Hamas conflict prompted a shift in the messaging of Israeli and Palestinian chef-influencers, we now turn to the audience response. Our goal is to assess how actor

conflict began.

[28] We also examined whether politicization varied by chefs' prior activity levels and expressive history in Appendix D. Politicization was shaped by both who the creators were and how they had used their platforms before the conflict. Chefs with prior political content were more likely to intensify their political messaging, particularly among Palestinian accounts, while high-volume posters tended to maintain a broader content strategy.

drift reshaped engagement: did politicization broaden reach by drawing in new audiences, or did it undermine the parasocial relationships that anchored these accounts before the conflict? To answer this, we examine both overall engagement with chef content—measured through likes and comments—and the behavior of "loyal" followers: users who had consistently interacted with these accounts in the pre-conflict period.

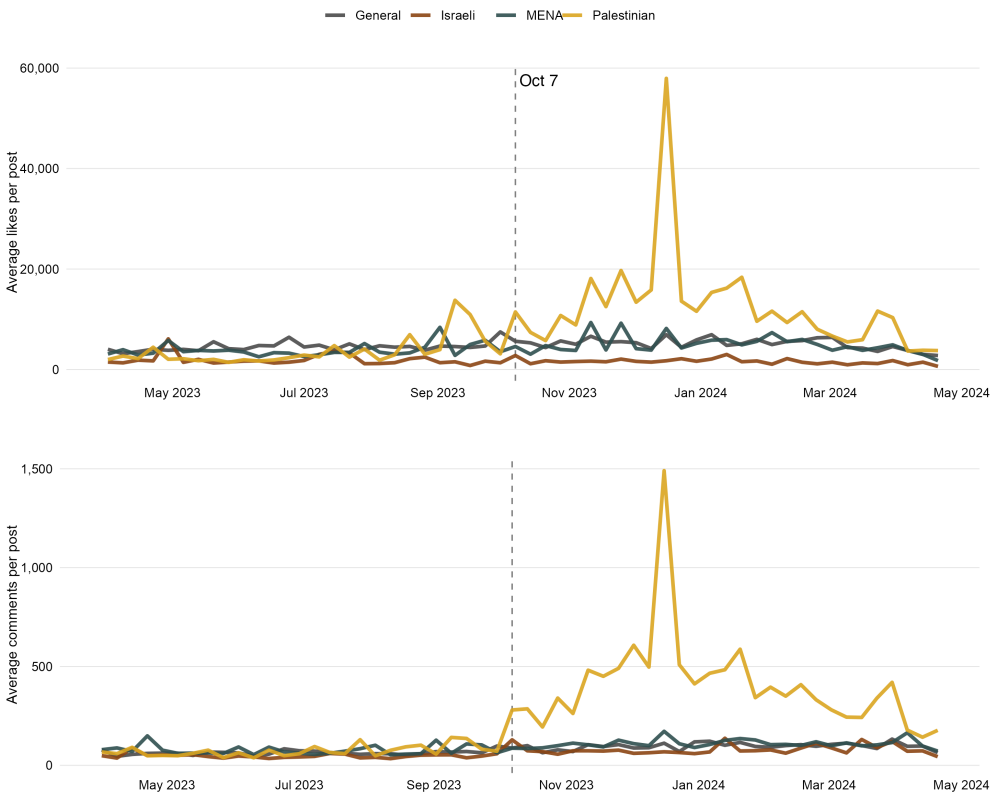


Figure 4: Engagement: Likes and comments before and after October 7th.

We first investigate whether politicization expanded the overall reach of chef content. Figure 4 shows the average number of likes (top) and comments (bottom panel) per post, before and after October 7. We document a dramatic increase in engagement with posts from Palestinian chefs. Average likes per post nearly quadrupled—from 3,198 to 12,129—and comments rose by 570%, from 68 to 389. In contrast, Israeli chefs, while producing an increased amount of political content, experienced a decline in likes (down 16%) and a more modest increase in comments (up 70%). Engagement levels were relatively similar across groups before the conflict, and the small uptick in late September for Palestinian chefs likely reflects new followers retroactively interacting with recent posts.[29] These findings suggest that politicization—especially among Palestinian chefs—expanded the reach of their content and drew broader attention.[30]

But what did this expansion mean for longstanding followers who had originally engaged with these

[29] We were not able to collect data on when the likes on a post were added. But if this is the case, our estimate of the increase in engagement with Palestinian chef content following the start of conflict would be a conservative one.

[30] In Appendix E, we also report changes in the breadth and diversity of the audience, as well as comment content analysis, to corroborate this point.

accounts for culinary rather than political content? To capture this dynamic, we examine the behavior of loyal followers: users who frequently commented on a given chef's posts in the months before the conflict. These users were, in effect, subject to an information shock—not by seeking political content, but by encountering it through an account they already followed, as a kind of natural experiment. We define "loyal followers" as users who left comments on at least eight different posts by a given chef account prior to October 2023.[31] This results in a dataset of 19,832 chef–commenter pairs, including 470 unique chefs (76% of the sample) and 16,338 unique commenters. We construct a chef–commenter–post panel with 7.6 million observations, in which our outcome variable is whether a frequent commenter engaged with a specific post.

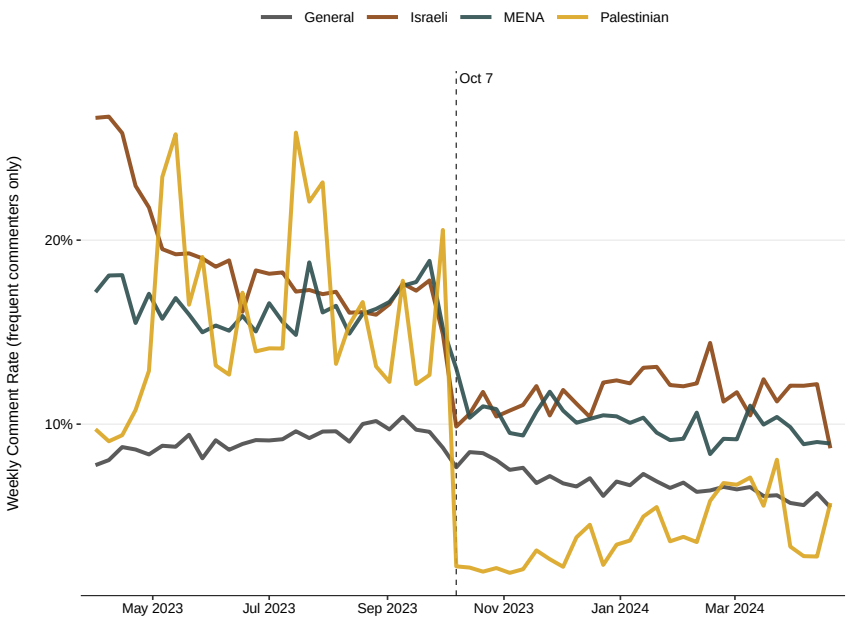


Figure 5: Engagement: Loyal followers only. Figure plots average probability that a loyal follower comments on a chef post, grouped by category and week.

Figure 5 presents the probability that a loyal follower commented on a given post, averaged by week and chef group. Pre-conflict trends are stable and similar across Palestinian, Israeli, and MENA chefs. After October 7, however, loyal followers sharply withdrew. Comment rates fell to 12% (from 19% pre-conflict) for Israeli chefs and 10% (from 16%) for MENA chefs. For Palestinian chefs, the drop was especially steep: just 3% of posts attracted comments from previously loyal followers, compared to 14% before October 7.

Why did loyal followers disengage so dramatically? One possibility is that users were broadly reacting to the conflict itself, distancing themselves from a polarized and emotionally charged geopolitical event. In this view, disengagement reflects a general discomfort with the topic of war, regardless of

[31] The 8-comment threshold captures 10% of all pre-conflict multi-commenters (individuals who commented on more than one posts by a given chef). As a robustness check, we replicate the analysis using a lower "loyal follower" comment threshold (5 posts) as well as a more stringent one (10 posts). Results document a similar effect (see Appendix Figures E.4 and E.5).

how much an account politicized. But another possibility is that withdrawal was triggered not by the conflict per se, but by the transformation of the accounts themselves—the disruption of parasocial expectations when apolitical chefs suddenly became political voices. The empirical question, then, is whether disengagement reflects a uniform reaction to the war or a differentiated response tied to the intensity of actor drift.

To adjudicate between these explanations, we test whether disengagement varies with the intensity of politicization. If loyal followers were simply reacting to the conflict itself, we would expect similar declines across all accounts tied to the region. By contrast, if withdrawal reflects actor drift, backlash should be stronger when accounts reorient more dramatically toward political content. Figure 6 plots the change in loyal follower commenting as a function of the percentage-point increase in political posts after October 7. The results strongly support the actor drift interpretation. Loyal followers of accounts that added little or no political content reduced their commenting only modestly (–4 points), whereas followers of accounts that became heavily politicized (80+ percentage-point increase) reduced their commenting by more than 40 points.[32] These differentiated patterns are inconsistent with a "war avoidance" explanation but consistent with the disruption of parasocial expectations as chefs redefined their messenger role.

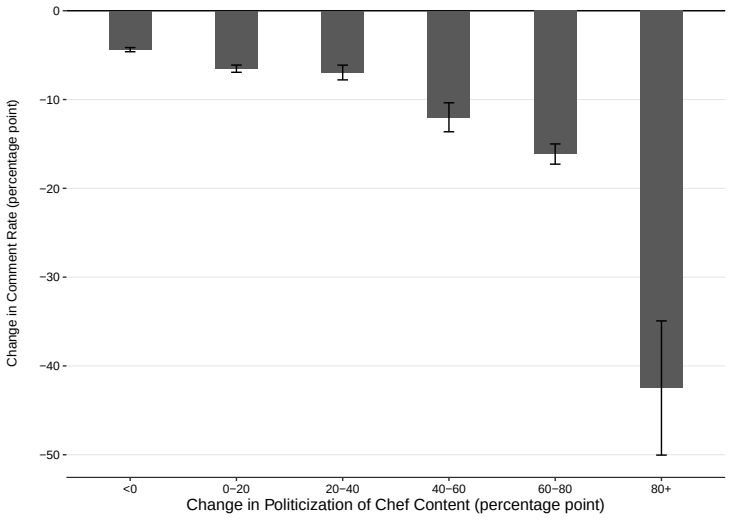


Figure 6: Supply-side Engagement: Intensity of actor politicization and engagement, loyal followers only. Figure reports the average change in comment rate among loyal followers as a function of how much political content is introduced. Chef accounts are grouped by difference in rate of political posts after and before October 7, 2023.

The previous analysis showed that loyal followers withdrew more sharply from accounts that underwent deeper politicization, suggesting that backlash scaled with the extent of actor drift. We now test this dynamic at the post level, asking whether the same followers selectively disengaged from political content while continuing to interact with familiar culinary posts. This distinction matters because it

[32] Appendix Table E.4 confirms these results with regression analysis. We also find that loyal commenters responded to politicization including pro-Palestine or pro-Israel messages in similar ways (Appendix Figure E.6).

rules out the possibility that loyal followers abandoned chefs altogether out of general conflict avoidance. If withdrawal reflects actor drift, loyal followers should remain active on food content while disengaging primarily from political posts.

Figure 7 presents this within-account comparison for chefs who had posted no political content prior to October 7, thereby exposing loyal followers to politicization for the first time. The results are clear. Commenting on apolitical posts declined only modestly (from 20% to 14%), but engagement with political posts dropped far more steeply. Among Palestinian chefs, loyal followers commented on apolitical posts at a rate of 17% but on political posts at just 5%. We observe a similar differentiation in comment patterns on political versus apolitical posts for Israeli and MENA chefs. This selective pattern indicates that withdrawal was not a blanket reaction to the conflict but a targeted response to politicization itself.

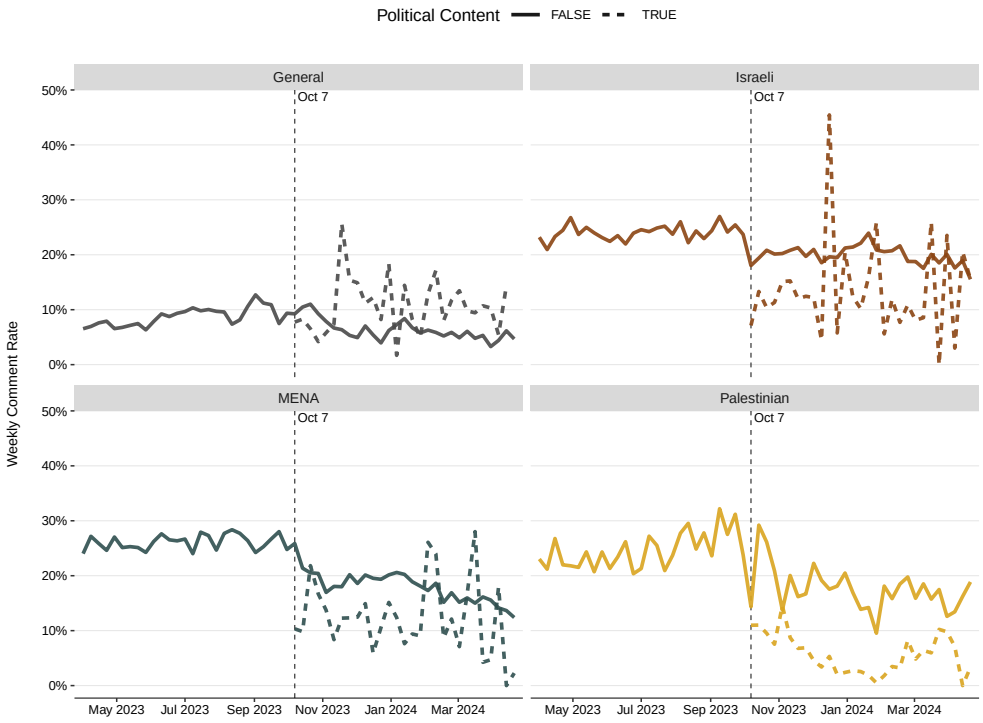


Figure 7: Demand-side Engagement: Political versus apolitical content, loyal followers newly exposed to political content. Figure shows average probability that a loyal follower comments on a chef post, differentiating between posts with political or exclusively culinary content. Sample is restricted to chef accounts that posted no political content before October 7.

These patterns suggest that actor drift disrupted the implicit contract of parasocial ties. For many loyal followers, the shift in content felt like a breach of expectations: they had come for cake and hummus recipes but instead encountered war, identity, and loss. Importantly, this reaction was not symmetrical. While politicization attracted new audiences (as shown earlier), long-time followers often disengaged. This divergence highlights a central tension in actor drift: politicization can expand reach, but it also risks eroding the very relationships that made these figures influential in the first place.

New Audiences and Content Drift

To understand why overall engagement rose even as loyal followers withdrew, we distinguish between two groups of commenters: loyal followers, who had engaged with a chef before October 7, and new audiences, who appeared for the first time afterward. This distinction allows us to capture two different dynamics: actor drift for longstanding followers and content drift for newcomers, whose first encounter with chefs came through politicized posts circulating in their feeds.

Because we cannot directly observe when users began following a given account, we approximate this dynamic through the timing of their first comments. Commenters who appear for the first time only after October 7 are plausibly new audiences whose initial exposure came through politicized posts circulating in their feeds.[33] For these individuals, political content was not an unexpected shift but the defining feature of the account. This helps explain the surge in aggregate engagement with Palestinian chefs noted earlier: politicization simultaneously alienated loyal followers while opening pathways for discovery by new audiences.

Table 2: Post–October 7 Engagement by Commenter Cohort and Chef Category

Chef Category	Commenter Cohort	Pure Cooking		Hybrid		Pure Political		Total
		N	%	N	%	N	%	
Israeli	Loyal	77,564	47.3	86,526	52.7	2	0.0	164,092
	New	349,237	79.9	49,699	11.4	37,928	8.7	436,864
Palestinian	Loyal	40,213	37.6	61,601	57.6	5,093	4.8	106,907
	New	196,100	9.4	934,754	44.7	959,462	45.9	2,090,316
MENA	Loyal	148,746	58.6	105,039	41.4	24	0.0	253,809
	New	539,691	84.5	77,307	12.1	21,880	3.4	638,878
General	Loyal	270,038	78.5	73,767	21.5	4	0.0	343,809
	New	1,476,425	95.4	46,679	3.0	23,738	1.5	1,546,842

Note: Unit of analysis is the commenter–chef–post relationship. The same individual may appear multiple times if they engaged with different chefs or with different types of posts. Loyal commenters are defined as users who commented at least eight times prior to October 7; new commenters are those whose first comment appeared after October 7. Columns classify the content of the chef's post (*Pure Cooking*, *Hybrid*, or *Pure Political*), not attributes of the commenter.

Table 2 reports post-October 7 engagement patterns across chef categories, distinguishing between two groups: loyal commenters and new commenters. The unit of analysis is the commenter–chef–post relationship, so the same individual may appear multiple times if they engaged with different chefs or with different types of posts. The columns labeled *Pure Cooking*, *Hybrid*, and *Pure Political* refer to the nature of the chef's post being commented on, rather than to stable attributes of the commenter.

The contrasts are striking. Among loyal commenters, engagement was relatively balanced across post types. Israeli chefs, for instance, received slightly more engagement on hybrid posts (52.7%) than on pure cooking posts (47.3%). Palestinian chefs showed the highest baseline political engagement, though still modest, with only 4.8% of comments on purely political posts. In sharp contrast, new commenters who engaged with Palestinian chefs after October 7 focused almost entirely on politicized

[33] Appendix Figure E.3 shows the distribution of commenters by the date of their first comment, with a particularly extreme uptick for Palestinian chefs after October 7.

content: 45.9% of their comments were on pure political posts and 44.7% on hybrid posts. Political content, once marginal, had become the focal point of new audience engagement.

The scale of this influx further magnifies the transformation in audience composition. Palestinian chefs attracted more than 2 million instances of engagement from new commenters after October 7—nearly twenty times larger than the roughly 107,000 comments left by their loyal follower base. While we cannot observe unique follower identities, this pattern reflects a dramatic expansion in audience composition,[34] for more evidence of audience diversification post-October 7. consistent with the supply-side results: Palestinian chefs produced the highest share of political content, and they also attracted the largest, most politicized new audiences. Other chef categories experienced only modest audience growth, with new commenters largely engaging with culinary content.[35]

This asymmetry underscores a critical feature of politicization in cultural spaces. The very same political posts that alienated long-time followers simultaneously attracted new ones, amplifying visibility and reshaping audience composition. Whereas actor drift generated withdrawal by violating expectations, content drift produced expansion by redefining what the account stood for. Together, these countervailing dynamics help explain why overall engagement metrics diverged so sharply from the behavior of loyal commenters.

Granted, our data cannot fully disentangle the mechanisms that produced this influx. We cannot directly observe how recommendation algorithms or platform-driven virality shaped exposure. Yet the sheer scale of new commenters, particularly on Palestinian chefs' posts, suggests that algorithmic amplification may have been an important catalyst. In this sense, these patterns reflect not just follower choice but the algorithms that propelled politicized content to wider audiences.

Taken together, these demand-side results reveal the complex dynamics that follow when cultural figures engage in politics. Politicization can expand reach and visibility, but it also disrupts established audience relationships, particularly with followers who did not anticipate or welcome a shift in tone. Over time, these asymmetric reactions may produce a new equilibrium: cultural figures once viewed as apolitical will be reclassified as political actors, with audiences increasingly narrowed to those already receptive to politicized content. The end result is a cultural space where audiences are increasingly ideologically sorted.

Discussion and Conclusion

Scholars have long recognized that much of what citizens know about politics arrives incidentally, and this dynamic has only intensified in today's entertainment-saturated digital environment. Yet most of the incidental exposure literature has framed this process in terms of *where* political content appears—such as a campaign ad at the end of a YouTube video or a news story shared by a Facebook friend—rather than asking what happens when the *sources* of information themselves change. To address this

[34] See Appendix E

[35] This asymmetry underscores the tight coupling between supply and demand: the chefs who politicized most were also those who drew in the largest and most politicized new audiences, while Israeli, MENA, and general chefs largely retained their culinary orientation despite attracting new commenters.

gap, we have identified and theorized the concept of *actor drift*: the process by which cultural figures once seen as apolitical begin to claim a political voice. We leverage the sudden politicization of cultural agents after the October 7 attack and demonstrate the complex trade-off they face in this platform era. By leveraging a naturalistic setting in which politicization is sudden, identity-linked, and observable at scale, we address many of the methodological challenges that have long constrained research on incidental exposure, which has typically focused on content drift (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Huang and Yang 2024; Nanz and Matthes 2020; Weeks et al. 2017; Wojcieszak et al. 2024).

As traditional news consumption declines, cultural agents like chefs, artists, and lifestyle influencers have become unlikely yet consequential vectors of political communication. Our results illustrate the emergence of cultural influencers as modern opinion leaders whose power is grounded in parasocial ties rather than institutional authority or political expertise. However, the politicization of once-apolitical cultural spaces could threaten shared touchstones and risk accelerating audience fragmentation and selective exposure. At the same time, the normative implications for democratic competence are mixed. Counterfactually, in a world without cultural agents politicizing, politics would flow primarily through institutional elites and legacy media. But when political information increasingly travels through unexpected channels, citizens may be receiving qualitatively different types of political knowledge, potentially less systematic or institutionally grounded.

Our findings also contribute to long-standing debates about selective exposure and echo chambers. Classic theories of media choice emphasize individuals' tendency to seek out congenial political information and avoid dissonant content. Yet actor drift complicates this dynamic: audiences initially engage with cultural figures for non-political reasons, meaning that exposure to politicized messages may bypass self-selection mechanisms altogether. In this sense, cultural influencers can act as "Trojan horses," inserting politics into spaces where audiences did not intend to encounter it. At the same time, the backlash we observe underscores how quickly politicization can trigger selective unfollowing and segmentation into like-minded clusters. Rather than resolving the echo chamber debate, actor drift suggests a dual possibility: cultural influencers can disrupt echo chambers by exposing otherwise disengaged publics to new perspectives, but they can also accelerate fragmentation when followers defect along political lines. Future research should explore the conditions under which actor drift widens exposure versus when it entrenches polarization.

As with any study, ours has limitations that point toward valuable directions for future research. First, the Israel–Hamas conflict's exceptionally polarizing nature presents both strengths and limits for generalizability. As an extreme case, it clarifies the mechanism of actor drift with unusual visibility, but the reactions we document may not extend to less divisive political issues where both audience costs and political stakes are lower. Second, we focus on a particular type of cultural agent, but food may occupy a unique position in cultural discourse (DeSoucey 2010). Scholars in anthropology and cultural sociology have long treated food as a political instrument, often a marker of identity (Chan and Farrer 2021; Laudan 2013; King 2019; Hintz 2025). Chef influencers occupy a particular space in cultural communication–even when they are not engaged in political speech, they may incidentally engage in a

kind of soft power by introducing global audiences to their native cuisine and, relatedly, national identity. Debates over the national origins of dishes such as hummus and falafel illustrate how cuisine can become entangled in disputes about cultural appropriation and gastronativism (Kassis 2017; Parasecoli 2022). Future research should examine politicization across a spectrum of issue salience, from local policy debates to culture-war flashpoints, to identify the boundary conditions of our findings. Comparative work across influencer types and cultural contexts will be necessary to establish how broadly the dynamics of actor drift travel.

A second avenue concerns the consequences of actor drift beyond online engagement. While our primary evidence is digital, we find suggestive indications that some chefs linked their posts to offline fundraising and charitable efforts (see Appendix F). Future work should examine these linkages more systematically to assess whether and how actor drift extends into real-world mobilization. Relatedly, our data cannot speak directly to whether followers learned about politics from exposure to politicized content. We measure likes and comments, not knowledge, persuasion, or attitude change. Surveys, panels, or experimental designs could test whether exposure through actor drift informs citizens in ways distinct from traditional content drift, and whether such effects endure or dissipate over time.

Beyond these substantive boundaries, our data pose additional challenges for identifying precise mechanisms. We rely on engagement proxies without access to follower histories or algorithmic recommendation data, preventing us from fully characterizing audience-influencer relationships. While we attempt to distinguish loyal from new commenters using timestamp analysis, this approach cannot definitively separate long-time passive followers from newcomers attracted by political content, limiting our assessment of audience composition changes. Because our measures are behavioral proxies, we cannot distinguish whether engagement reflects genuine political socialization or more superficial interaction. Despite these caveats, our approach provides a methodological advance over designs that trade external validity for causal identification. By analyzing political episodes as they unfold in real time, we capture the authentic dynamics of digital political communication in ways experimental settings cannot. This allows us to approximate what is otherwise one of the most elusive dynamics in digital politics: incidental exposure, a notoriously difficult phenomenon to measure.

For parties and campaigns, the politicization of cultural influencers presents both opportunity and risk. Political elites are increasingly seeking to partner with cultural creators to reach disengaged publics, yet the very messengers best able to do so are those whose political voice is newest—because they are still perceived as authentic and apolitical. Sustained politicization, however, carries costs: once influencers are repeatedly identified as political, they risk alienating precisely the low-interest and independent audiences elites most wish to mobilize. This paradox makes the incorporation of cultural influencers into partisan strategy inherently self-limiting, while also pointing to a deeper transformation. As influencers become more deeply integrated into electoral politics, they not only reshape patterns of political communication but also raise thorny questions about transparency and accountability, including whether paid content amounts to a new form of "dark money" in campaign finance (Lorenz 2025; Zakrzewski 2024). The rise of cultural elites as political messengers is therefore not a

curiosity at the margins of civic life but a structural shift in how democratic discourse unfolds (Chmel et al. 2025). Whether this shift represents a democratization of political voice or a corrosion of civic competence is an open question—but it is one we can no longer ignore.

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Online Appendix

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A Ethical Standards

This study analyzed publicly available content from Instagram accounts and associated user comments. All data examined in this research were posted publicly by users on Instagram's platform and were accessible without requiring login credentials or special permissions. As such, this study did not involve direct interaction with human subjects and did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval under federal guidelines for research involving publicly available information.

Nevertheless, we took several steps to ensure ethical data collection and analysis practices throughout the study. First, we limited our data collection exclusively to public Instagram posts and comments, respecting platform privacy settings and user expectations. We did not attempt to access private accounts, direct messages, or other non-public information. Second, while we identified chef accounts by their public usernames for data collection purposes, we anonymized individual commenter identities in our analysis and reporting. No personally identifying information about commenters was retained or reported.

Third, we implemented data security measures to protect the collected information. All datasets were stored on password-protected, access-restricted servers. Only members of the research team had access to the raw data, and data handling followed established protocols for sensitive digital information. Fourth, our analysis focused on aggregate patterns and trends rather than highlighting individual accounts or users in ways that could cause harm or unwanted attention.

The publicly accessible nature of Instagram content means users have made their posts available for viewing by the general public. However, we recognize that users may not have anticipated academic analysis of their content. Our research approach prioritized examining broad behavioral patterns across many accounts rather than detailed analysis of specific individuals' content or personal information. The anonymized, aggregated data and code used in this study will be made available in a public repository upon publication, consistent with transparency requirements while protecting individual privacy.

B Examples of Instagram Postings from Chefs

The following figures illustrate the transformation in content and messaging across multiple chef-influencer accounts before and after October 7, 2023. These examples demonstrate the broader pattern of actor drift beyond the single case highlighted in the main text. Each pair shows posts from the same account: the left panel displays typical pre-conflict content focused on food presentation and culinary appeal, while the right panel shows post-conflict content where similar visual elements are recontextualized through political messaging, cultural identity assertions, or references to the ongoing crisis. These cases reveal how the shift toward politicization occurred across diverse chef-influencers, suggesting a systematic rather than isolated phenomenon. The visual consistency paired with dramatically altered captions and engagement patterns underscores how familiar content became vehicles for political expression, fundamentally changing the relationship between these food influencers and their audiences.

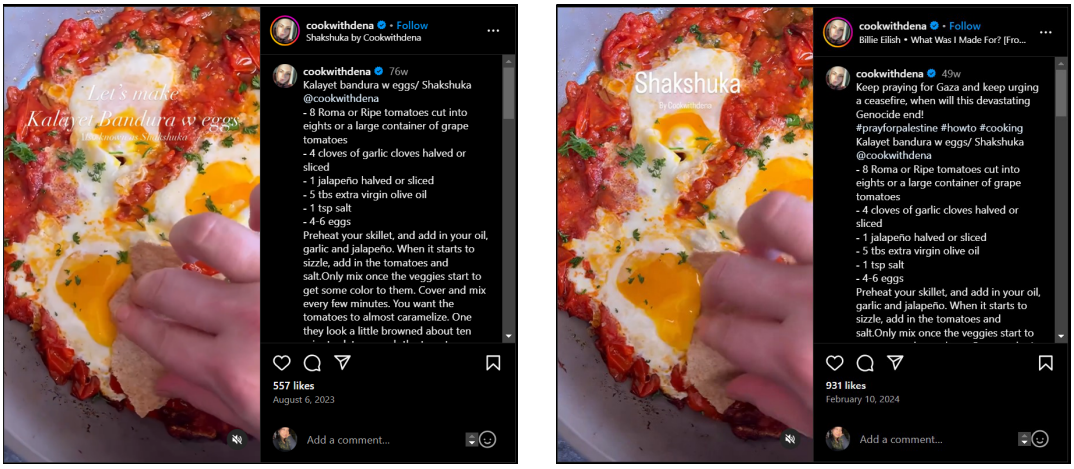


Figure B.1: @cookwithdena (Palestinian)

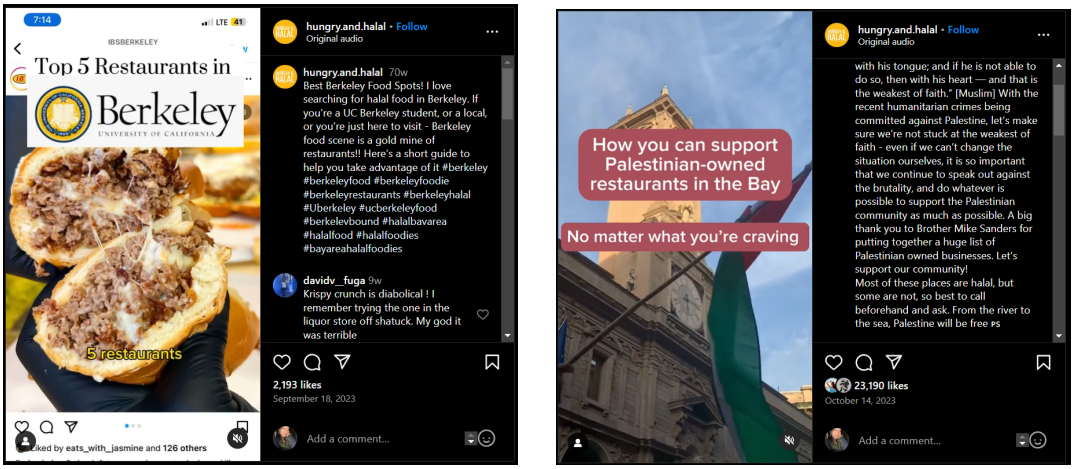


Figure B.2: @hungry.and.halal (Palestinian)

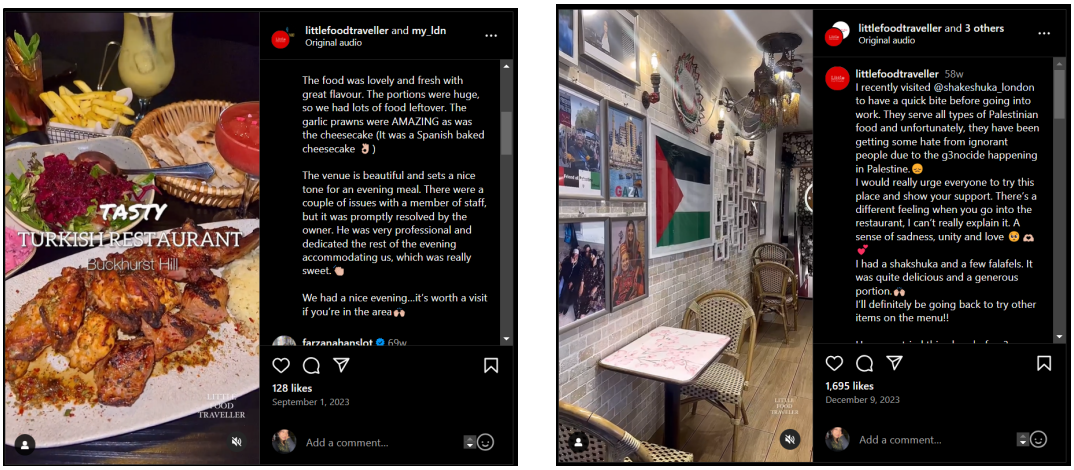


Figure B.3: @littlefoodtraveler (Palestinian)

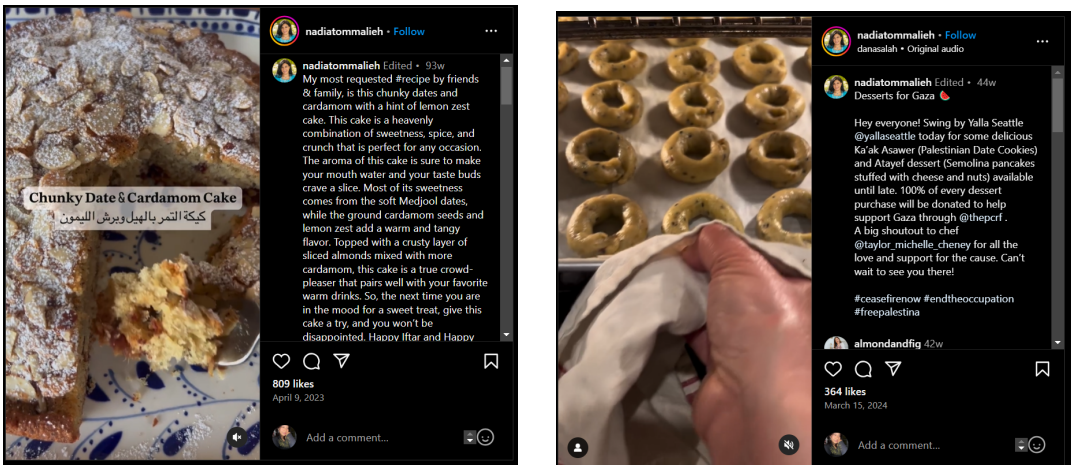


Figure B.4: @nadiatommalieh (Palestinian)

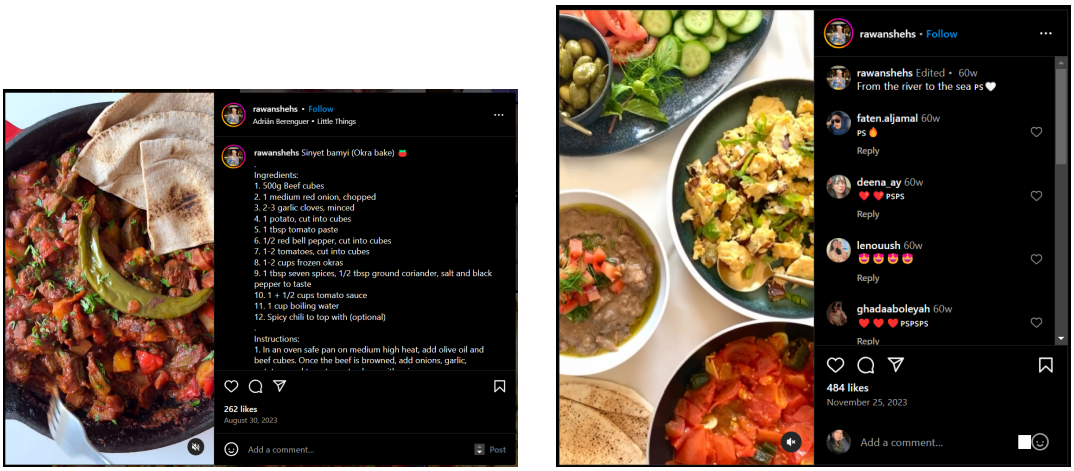


Figure B.5: @rawanshehs (Palestinian)

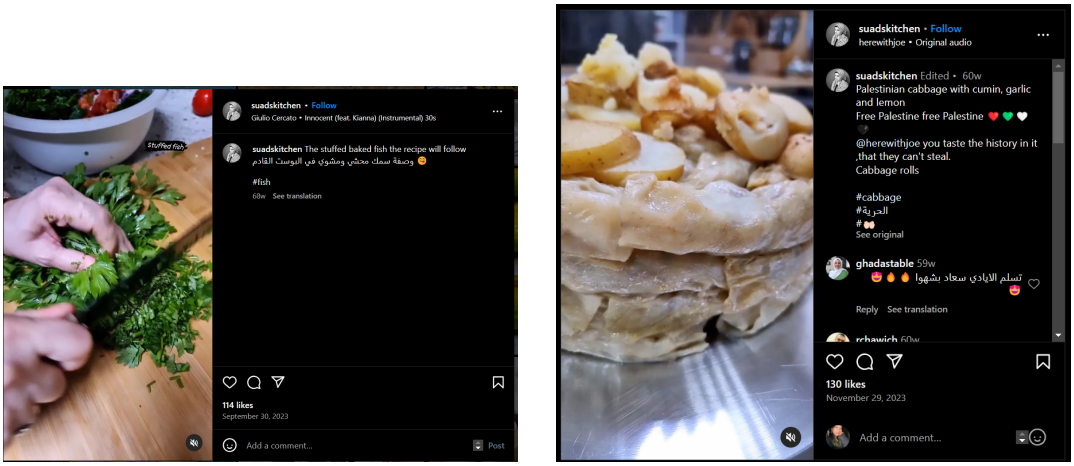


Figure B.6: @suadskitchen (Palestinian)

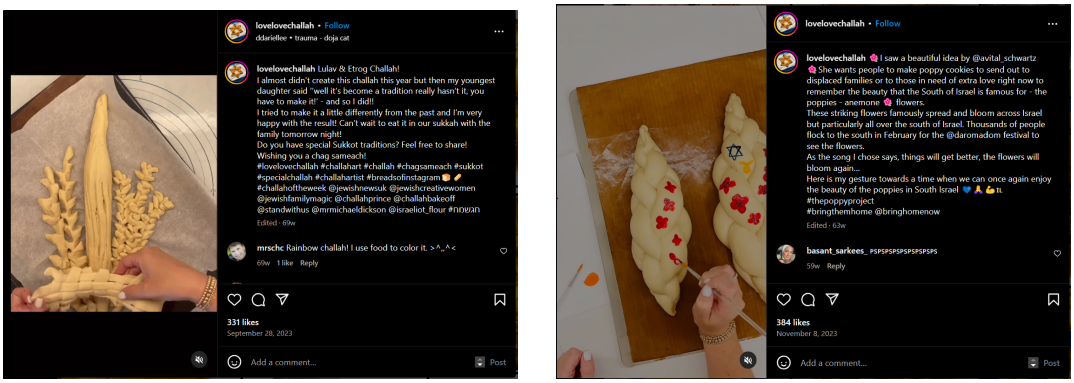


Figure B.7: @lovelovechallah (Israeli)

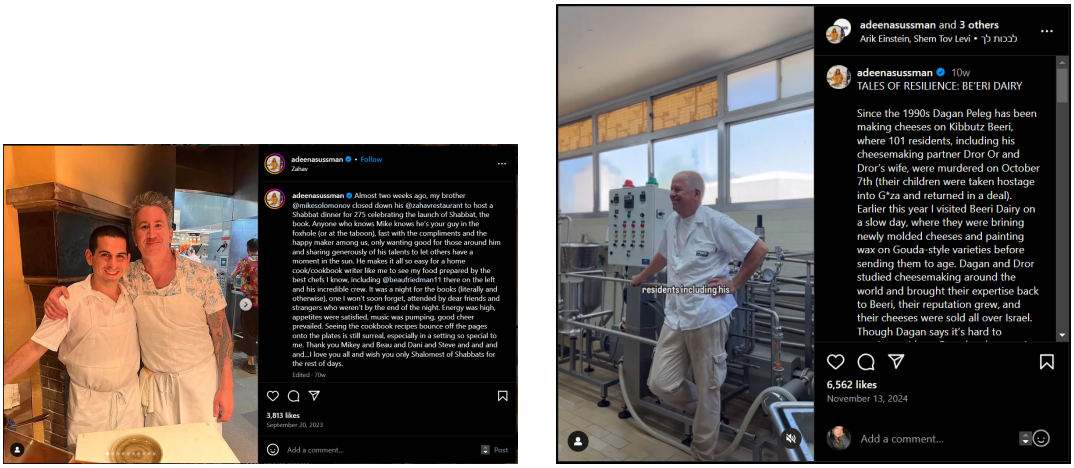


Figure B.8: @adeenasussman (Israeli)

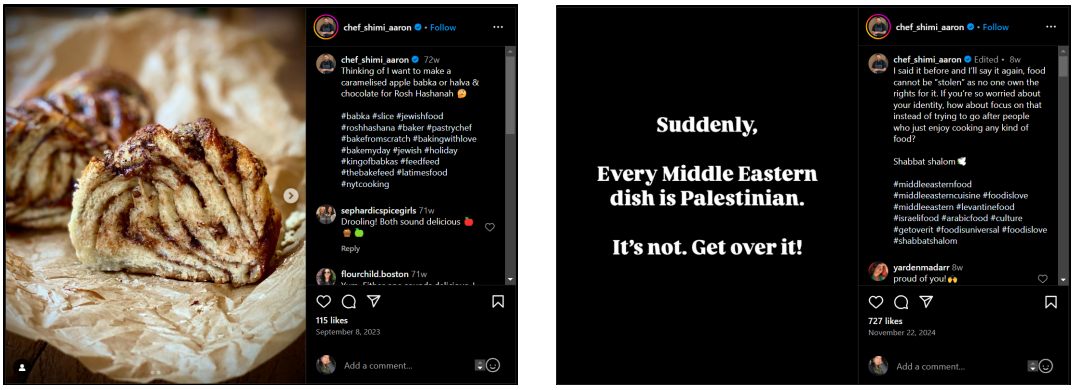


Figure B.9: @chef_shimi_aaron (Israeli)

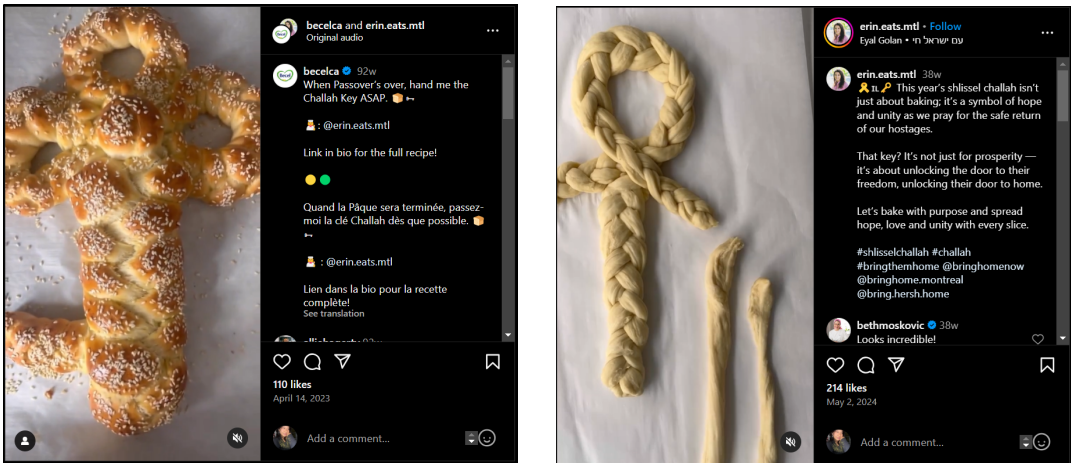


Figure B.10: @suadskitchen (Israeli)



Figure B.11: @aviconforti (Israeli)

C Details on Content Analysis

We develop comprehensive content metrics for both post captions and audience comments, focusing on two main analytical tasks. We first identify posts containing political content related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Second, we categorize each post based on its primary focus—whether it centers on food/cuisine, politics, or addresses both domains equally. Beyond classification, we assess sentiment patterns across posts and comments to understand audience engagement and response dynamics.

C.1 Post Classification

We employ a multi-method approach to identify posts referencing the Israel-Palestine conflict, combining three distinct classification techniques to maximize accuracy and minimize both false positives and false negatives. Our first approach utilizes targeted hashtags with high specificity to the conflict. We manually curated a comprehensive list of hashtags including #freepalestine, #bringthemhome, #standwithisrael, #gazaunderattack, #ceasefirenow, and approximately 230 additional conflict-specific hashtags. Posts containing any of these hashtags are automatically classified as political. Second, we trained a word2vec model on our complete dataset of posts to identify semantically related terms beyond explicit hashtags. Using seed words with high conflict specificity ("israel," "palestine," "hostage," and "genocide"), we generated expanded dictionaries of topically relevant terms with cosine similarity scores above 0.69. We manually code proximate terms to identify a list of terms that are sufficiently specific and relevant to the conflict. This approach captures posts discussing the conflict without using standard hashtags. Last but not least, we employed OpenAI's *gpt-4o-2024-08-06* model to identify captions expressing pro-Israel or pro-Palestine stances. The model was prompted to classify posts on two dimensions: (1) whether the post references the Israel-Palestine conflict, and (2) the directional stance (pro-Israel, pro-Palestine, or neutral). We also assess post sentiment using the Bing sentiment lexicon, calculating negative, positive, and net sentiment scores for each caption. We use this metric primarily in supplementary analyses to examine how the emotional tone of chef content shifted in the wake of October 7 (Appendix D). There are limitations in relying exclusively on a lexicon for measures of sentiment; a key concern is that some aspects of the lexicon conflate content with tone (for example, because 'bomb' is included as a negative sentiment word, content discussing the conflict may be labeled as containing negative sentiment by definition). Nevertheless, this metric is useful in establishing consistent pre-trends in tone across categories (Figure D.5). Collectively, about 70% of the chef influencer posts in our dataset have positive net sentiment.

C.1.1 Classification Performance

Our three approaches to coding political content generate three different classification measures. Of these, the LLM method is most inclusive, classifying 7% of posts as political; this is followed by word2vec (6% political) and political hashtags (2.4% political). The LLM-based coding demonstrates strong alignment with dictionary-based methods, suggesting robust convergent validity across approaches (Table 3). The word2vec and LLM methods in particular are closely linked; political hashtags are correlated with each but capture a smaller subset of posts overall (that is to say, the lower correlation reflects the fact that a large number of political posts do not include explicitly political hashtags).

We validate each approach using a hand-coded stratified subset of 200 randomly selected posts (split evenly between posts coded as political and posts coded as non-political). The Type I error rate for all three methods is very low; for word2vec and political hashtag methods, the Type II error rate exceeds the Type I error rate.

Table 3: Political classification: Correlation matrix

	LLM-coded	Word2vec	Political hashtag
LLM-coded	1.00	0.81	0.53
Word2vec	0.81	1.00	0.55
Political hashtag	0.53	0.55	1.00

For our primary binary measure of whether a post contains political content related to the conflict, we therefore aggregate all three classification measures. That is to say, a post is coded as political if at least one of the three methods classifies it that way. This aggregate measure classifies 7.6% of all posts as containing political content. For this aggregate measure, we report a Type I error rate of 4% and Type II error rate of 1% based on our hand-coded stratified sample.

C.2 Comment Classification

We develop parallel measures for audience comments using adapted versions of our post classification methods. Comments are classified as political using the dictionary-based approach (hashtags and word2vec terms). Sentiment analysis employs both the Bing lexicon and emoji classification, given that social media comments frequently consist primarily of emoji reactions. We manually categorized emojis as positive (hearts, smiling faces, celebratory symbols) or negative (sad faces, angry faces, crying symbols), creating comprehensive emoji sentiment dictionaries. Additionally, we construct measures of comment engagement behavior, specifically whether commenters further disseminated post content by sharing or tagging additional accounts using the @ symbol.

C.3 Prompts

We used OpenAI's *gpt-4o-2024-08-06* model to code post content. We gave the LLM the following instructions:
"We have an Instagram post from a famous chef. Please analyze the content to determine whether it expresses political bias and classify it as either neutral, pro-Palestine, or pro-Israel. If the post does not mention politics or conflict, classify it as neutral. If it references the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, war, or violence, follow these guidelines:

Pro-Palestine: The post expresses sympathy or support for Palestinians, highlights Palestinian suffering, or advocates for Palestinian rights. Indicators include phrases like *occupation, Israeli military actions, children of Gaza, Free Palestine*, or hashtags like:

- #chefsforpalestine
- #childrenofpalestinedeservelife
- #speakupforgaza
- #stopbombinggaza
- #stopkillingjournalists
- #stopkillingpalestinians
- #stopthegenocideinpalestine
- #freepalestine
- #ceasefirenow
- #gazaunderattack
- #genocide

- #apartheidisrael

Mentions of Gaza that focus on Palestinian suffering, Israeli military actions in Gaza, or Palestinian sovereignty should be classified as pro-Palestine.

Pro-Israel: The post expresses sympathy or support for Israel, mentions Israeli security, or advocates for Israel's right to defend itself. Indicators include phrases like *terrorism, Hamas attacks, Israel's right to self-defense*, or any of the following hashtags:

- #cookforisrael
- #cookingforisrael
- #israelunderattack
- #standwithisrael
- #bringthemhomenow
- #amisraelchai
- #antisemitism
- #westandwithisrael

Mentions of Gaza that emphasize Hamas, rocket attacks on Israel, or Israeli civilian suffering should be classified as pro-Israel.

Neutral: The post does not take a clear stance on the conflict, or it balances both perspectives without favoring one side. Also classify it as neutral if the post is apolitical or focuses only on food or non-political topics.

Analyze both hashtags and the text for implicit references. If the political bias is unclear, mark it as neutral.

Here is the text of the post: []

D Additional Supply-Side Analysis

D.1 Posting Frequency Analysis

As noted in the main text, the observed shifts in political content were not merely artifacts of increased posting activity. Figure D.1 depicts pre- and post-treatment trends in the average weekly post rate per account by group. The week starting with October 7, 2023 is denoted by a vertical dotted gray line in this and subsequent time trend graphics. While pre-treatment weekly trends are relatively static, there is a notable increase in the posting rate of Palestinian chefs at the start of conflict. Though the initial spike drops off, there is a moderate but persistent increase in posts throughout the subsequent six-month period: Palestinian chefs post an average of 2.6 posts per week following the start of conflict, compared to 1.8 pre-conflict. In contrast, Israeli chefs do not exhibit a substantive change in their posting rate (averaging 2.4 posts per week pre-conflict and 2.3 post-conflict).

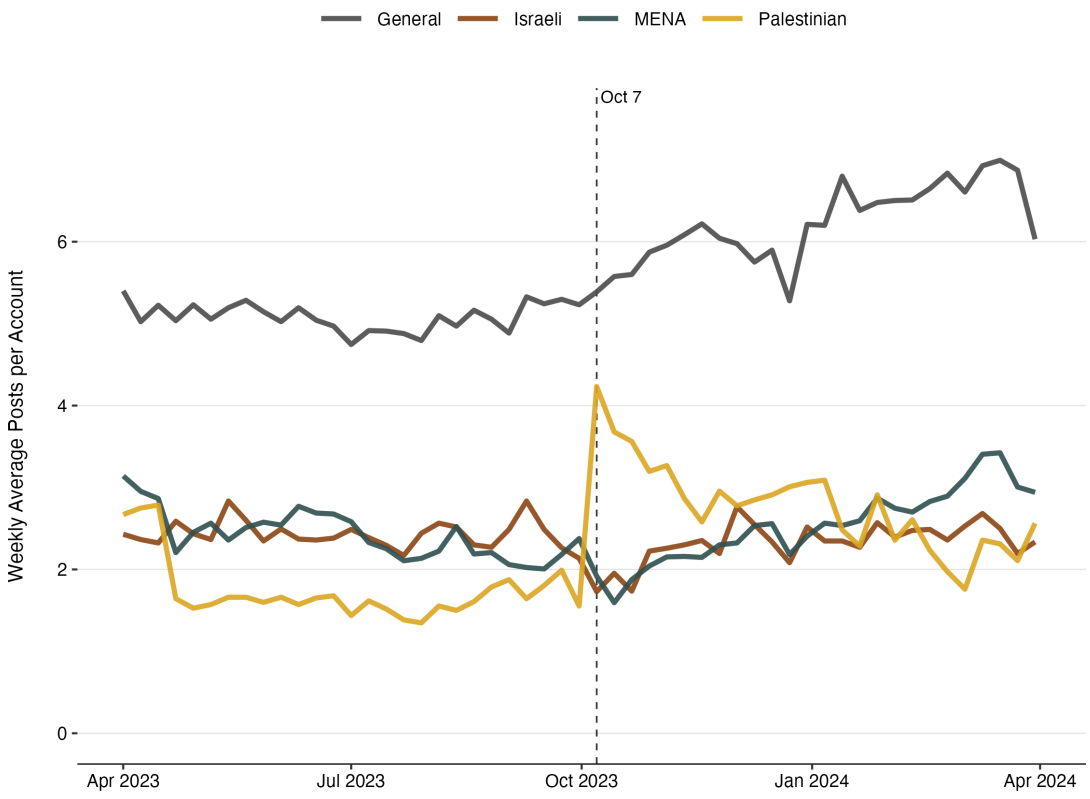


Figure D.1: Weekly Instagram Posting Rates by Chef Group Before and After October 7, 2023. The vertical dotted line marks October 7, 2023

D.2 Timing of Political Content Introduction

Figure D.2 depicts the speed with which chef accounts introduced political content following the events of October 7th using a Kaplan-Meier survival analysis, organized by chef group. The plot shows the cumulative proportion of accounts that had introduced political content by each time point. Approximately one-third of Israeli and Palestinian chefs (35% and 33%, respectively) included some amount of content related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prior to October 7th, 2023. A large segment of previously apolitical accounts introduced political content within a few weeks, with an additional 20% of Israeli accounts and 30% of Palestinian accounts politicizing rapidly after the conflict began. Within one month, roughly two-thirds of Israeli accounts and three-quarters of Palestinian accounts had introduced political content, demonstrating the immediate and widespread nature of the politicization response, rather than a gradual, audience-driven process.

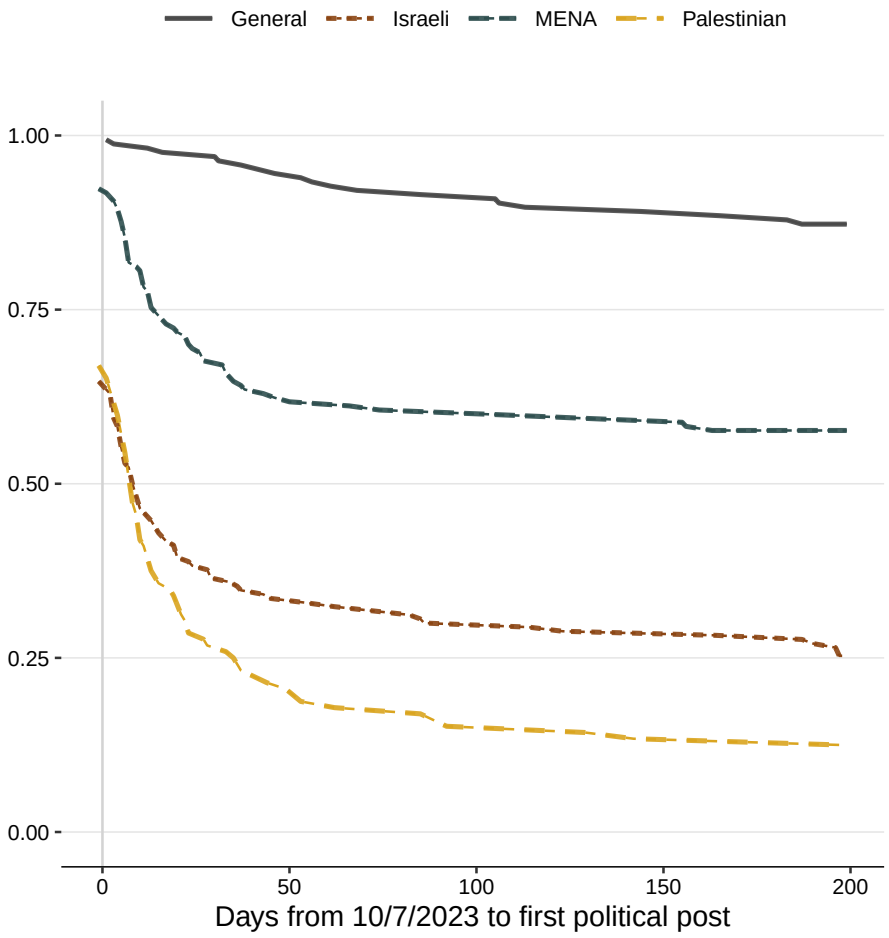


Figure D.2: Kaplan-Meier Survival Analysis: Time to First Political Post by Chef Group After October 7, 2023. The plot shows the cumulative proportion of accounts introducing political content over time.

D.3 Persistence of Political Content

Figure D.3 replicates Figure 3 in the main manuscript but disaggregates across multiple time periods following the October 7th outbreak of conflict, exploring the persistence of politicization over time. As in the main text, account classification is based on the proportion of posts within the designated period containing political content. Many accounts continued to post political content at high rates months after the conflict began, suggesting that the initial expressive response was not merely a temporary reaction but reflected a sustained shift in content strategy.

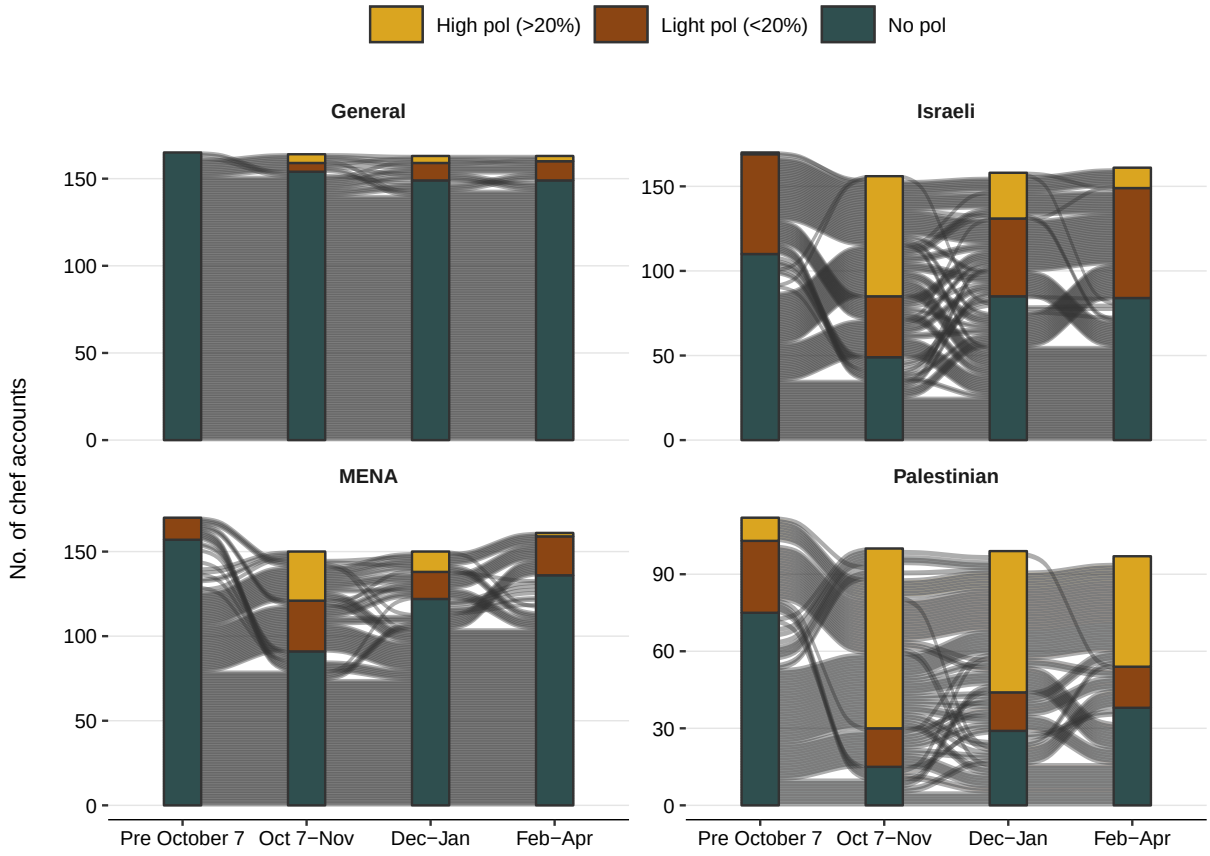


Figure D.3: Multi-Period Analysis of Political Content Introduction and Persistence by Chef Group. This Sankey diagram tracks the flow of accounts between political and non-political content categories across successive time periods following October 7, 2023.

D.4 Heterogeneous Politicization

We examined whether politicization varied by chefs' prior activity levels and expressive history. Figure D.4 reveals that politicization was shaped by both creator identity and pre-conflict platform usage patterns. The top panel shows the relationship between pre-conflict posting volume and post-conflict political content proportion. Israeli chefs show no clear pattern, while Palestinian chefs exhibit a strong negative association—highly active accounts maintained broader content strategies while less active accounts became more explicitly political. The bottom panel disaggregates by prior history of political expression. Among Palestinian chefs with pre-conflict political content, the war served as a powerful activating event, particularly for lower-volume accounts. Previously apolitical accounts, especially high-volume posters, were less likely to politicize. Israeli chefs showed more uniform responses regardless of political history, suggesting different activation mechanisms across identity groups. These patterns demonstrate that political expression depends not only on identity ties but also on prior expressive behavior and engagement patterns.

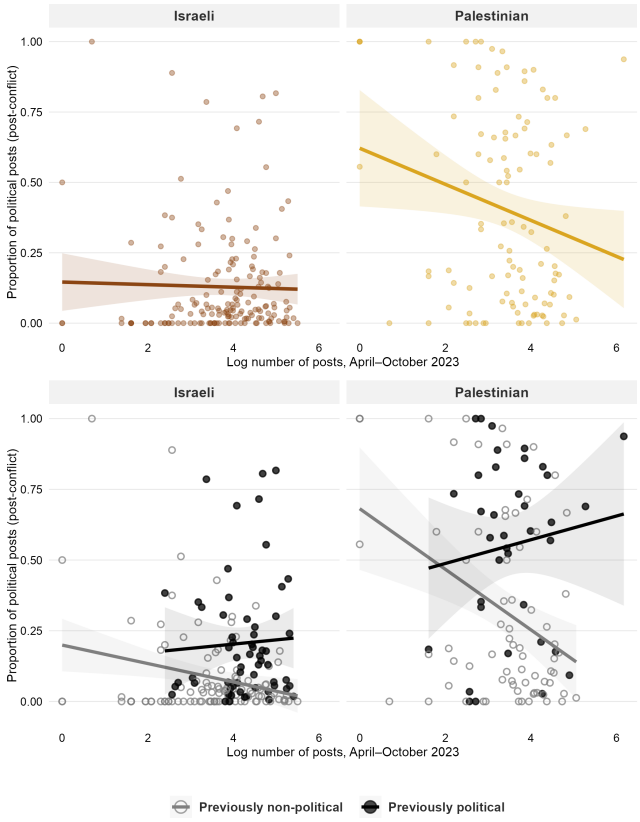


Figure D.4: Political Content Proportion by Prior Activity Level and Expressive History. Top panel shows the relationship between pre-conflict posting volume (log posts, x-axis) and post-conflict political content proportion (y-axis) for Israeli and Palestinian chefs. Bottom panel distinguishes accounts by whether they posted political content before October 7, 2023.

D.5 Sentiment Analysis

Beyond examining the volume and timing of political content, we also analyzed how the conflict affected the emotional tone of posts across chef groups. Figure D.5 depicts the average post sentiment by group across time, revealing both immediate impacts and divergent recovery patterns.[36] Pre-conflict sentiment trends were remarkably similar across all groups: approximately 70% of posts were coded as positive, which is perhaps unsurprising given the typical subject matter of food content. This baseline similarity changed dramatically after October 7th, when both Palestinian and Israeli chefs increased their net negative content in the immediate wake of the attack. However, the groups exhibited strikingly different recovery trajectories. While Israeli chefs returned to pre-conflict sentiment levels within a few months, Palestinian chefs continued to produce considerably more negative content six months later.

This persistent negativity among Palestinian chefs reflects both a shift in subject matter—words like "bomb" and "genocide" are categorized by the Bing lexicon as having negative sentiment—and a broader change in tone. Even when restricting analysis to posts with political content, Palestinian chefs were substantially more likely to express negative sentiment (72% of political posts) compared to chefs in other groups (44% of political posts). This pattern suggests that the conflict's impact on Palestinian chefs extended beyond simply adding political topics to their content mix, fundamentally altering the emotional register of their online expression in ways that persisted well beyond the initial crisis period.

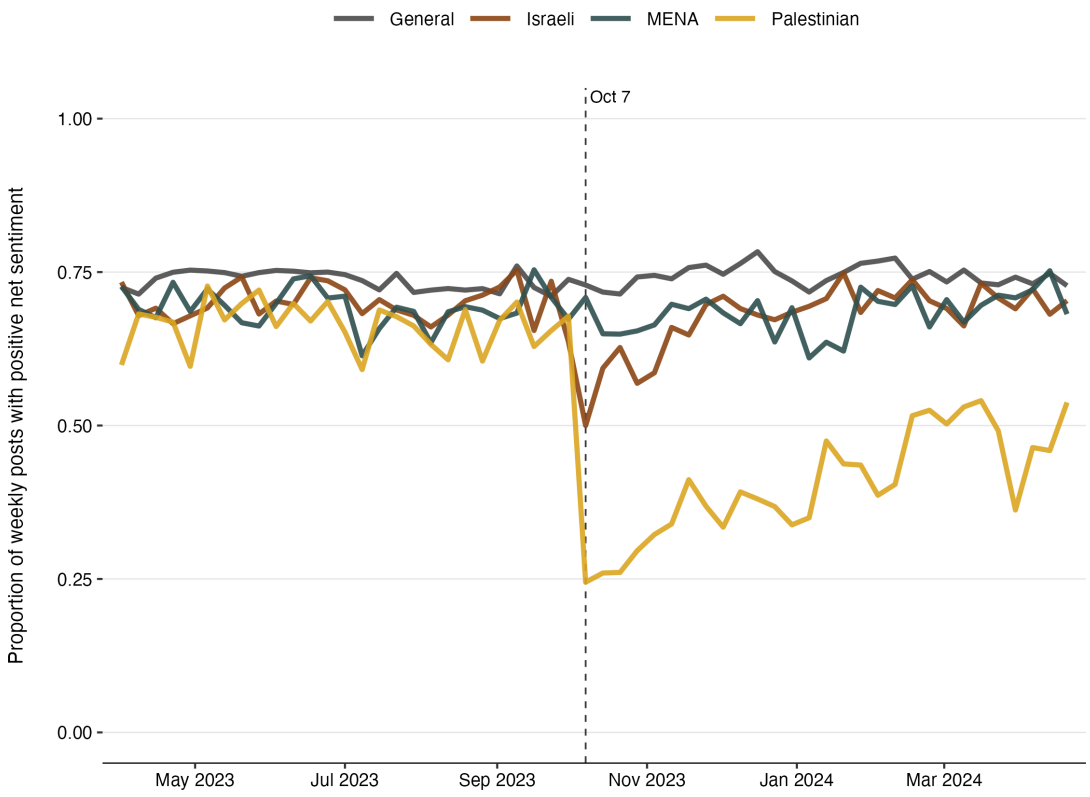


Figure D.5: Post Sentiment Over Time by Chef Group

[36] Posts are coded as having positive net sentiment if the number of positive sentiment words exceeds the number of negative sentiment words, identified using the Bing sentiment lexicon.

D.6 Content Displacement

A key question in understanding creator politicization is whether political content supplements or displaces existing content categories. Figure D.6 examines this trade-off by tracking the proportion of posts with specified content (food vs. politics) across chef groups over time. The analysis reveals stark differences in how groups managed their content portfolios following October 7th.

For General and MENA chefs, political content remained minimal throughout the observation period, allowing food content to maintain stable proportions around 75-80%. However, Israeli and Palestinian chefs exhibited dramatic shifts that illuminate different displacement patterns. Israeli chefs experienced an immediate drop in food content (from around 80% to approximately 40-50%) as political content spiked. But this represented a temporary displacement: within months, Israeli chefs largely returned to food-focused content as political posting declined.

and severe drop in food content proportion—from approximately 80% to below 25%—as political content spiked to nearly 75% of posts in the immediate aftermath of October 7th

Palestinian chefs showed a different trajectory. They also experienced an initial and severe drop in food content proportion—from approximately 80% to below 25%—while political content jumped to 75% in the immediate aftermath of October 7th. Yet this displacement proved more persistent. Six months after the conflict began, Palestinian chefs continued posting substantially less food content than their pre-conflict baseline, with political content maintaining a sustained presence. This pattern suggests that for Palestinian chefs, the introduction of political content represented a more fundamental shift in content strategy rather than a temporary crisis response.

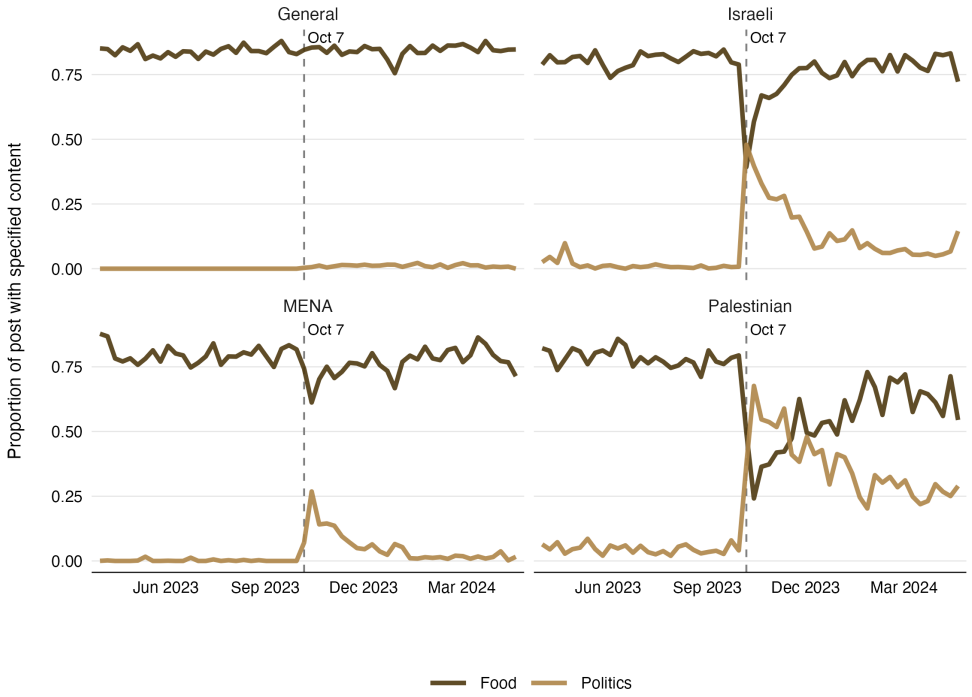


Figure D.6: Content Displacement: Food vs. Political Content Over Time by Chef Group. The figure shows the proportion of posts containing food content (dark line) and political content (light line) from June 2023 to March 2024.

E Additional Demand-Side Analyses

E.1 Audience Reach and Dissemination Patterns

In addition to the engagement measures in the main text, we also consider the broadness and diversity of the audience for chef content. Here, we construct two additional measures that capture how widely content spread and how diverse the audience became following politicization. The first measure examines whether commenters shared posts with other social media users. Figure E.1, top panel, plots the average number of comments that shared a post, across group and time. We find that the number of shares increases sharply for Palestinian chefs, again exceeding the trends for other groups.[37]

Our second measure examines the diversity of languages represented in the comment section (Figure E.1, bottom panel).[38] Prior to the conflict, the average post by a Palestinian chef attracted comments in five different languages—comparable to the comment diversity for other groups. Yet after October 7th, this nearly doubled, to 9.8 languages per post. By contrast, Israeli chefs seem to communicate with a narrower audience: the average comments section before the conflict included 4.3 languages (the lowest among the four groups) and 4.8 afterward. The shares and linguistic diversity provide added evidence that Palestinian chefs reached a much broader and more global social media audience following the start of conflict and corresponding shift in content.

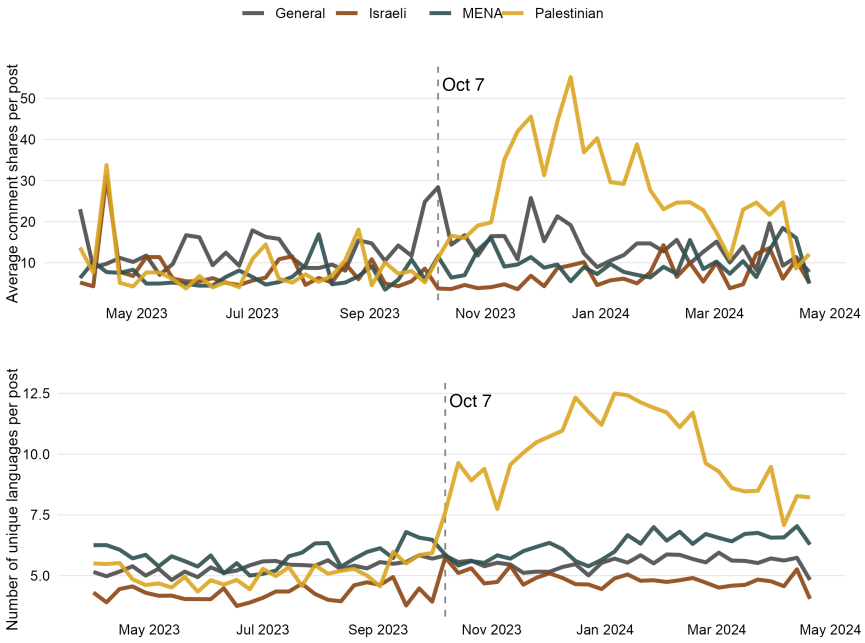


Figure E.1: Content Dissemination and Audience Diversity by Chef Group. Top panel shows average number of commenter shares per post over time. Bottom panel displays unique commenter languages per post as a measure of audience diversity.

[37] Of course, the number of shares could be positively correlated with the total number of comments on a post. Yet we also find a positive effect when we look at the proportion of posts with at least one comment share. Before the conflict, 70% of posts by Palestinian chefs were shared by commenters; this subsequently increased to 78%.

[38] We exclude comments written exclusively in emojis from this count.

E.2 Political Discourse in Comment Sections

Did the political turn of the chef accounts prompt increased political discourse among followers? Figure E.2 examines political expression in the comment section, plotting the proportion of comments per post that expressed support for Israel (left panel) or Palestine (right panel), by category and across time. We find evidence that the politicization of the comments section increased after October 7th, in patterns roughly corresponding to those shown above: Israeli accounts were more likely than others to attract pro-Israel comments, and Palestinian accounts attracted more pro-Palestine comments. Palestinian chef posts were also more likely than others to see some polarization in the comments, with both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian discourse appearing simultaneously.

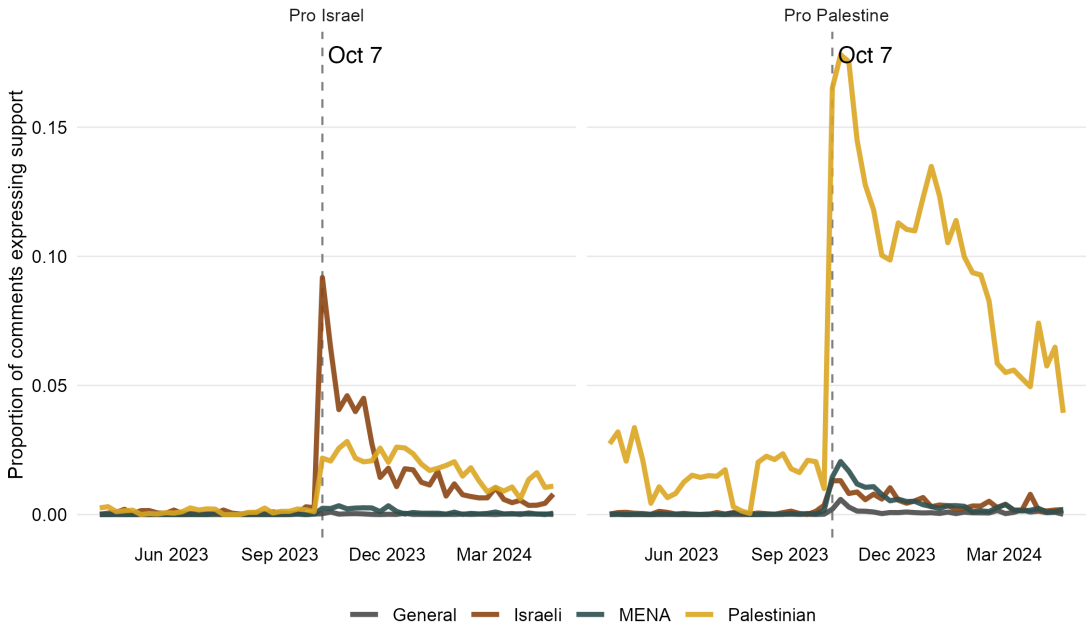


Figure E.2: Political Discourse in Comments by Chef Group and Time. Left panel shows proportion of comments expressing pro-Israel viewpoints; right panel shows pro-Palestine sentiment.

E.3 New Followers and Audience Composition

Figure E.3 examines the temporal distribution of when commenters first engaged with each chef group. Unique commenters appear in this distribution on the date of their first comment. This analysis provides insights into whether the surge in political engagement came from longtime followers or newly attracted audiences drawn by the political content. Notably, Palestinian accounts see a dramatic influx of new commenters following October 7th, corresponding to the overall increase in engagement with these accounts (Figure 4). The large number of new commenter accounts is emblematic of content drift.

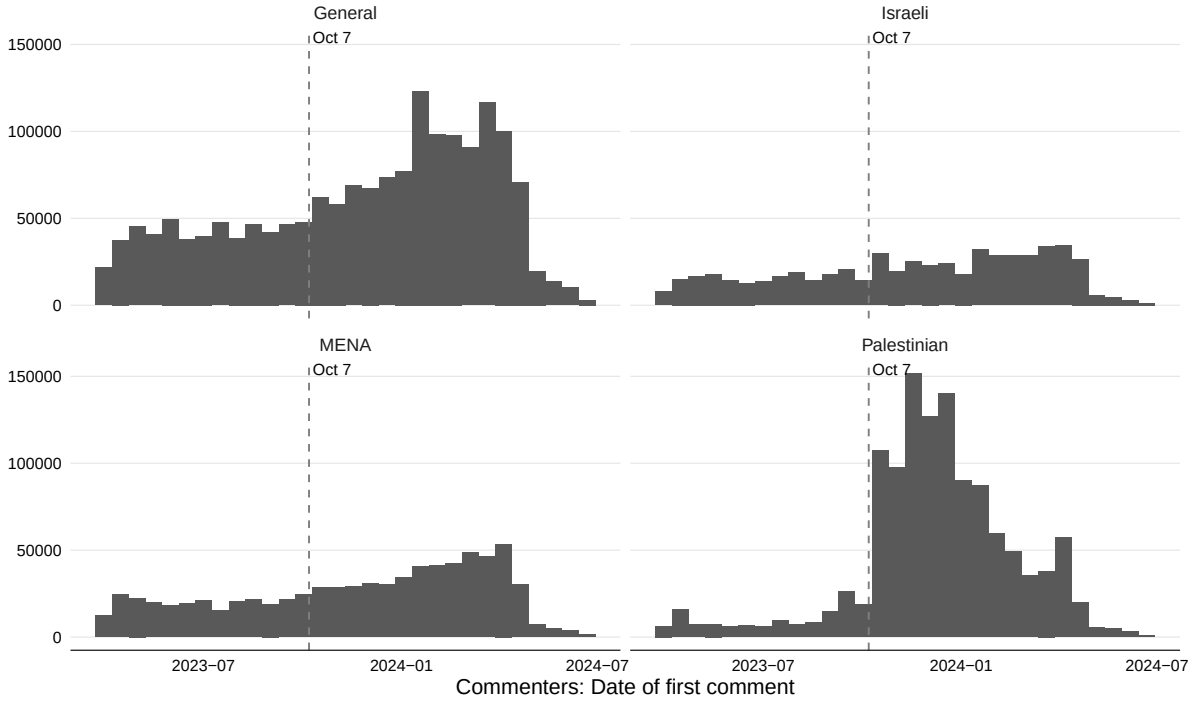


Figure E.3: Distribution of Commenters by Date of First Comment Across Chef Groups

E.4 Loyal Followers: Robustness checks

In Figure 5, "loyal" followers are defined as follower accounts that commented on at least 8 individual chef posts prior to October 7th, 2023. We select that threshold as it represents the top 10th percentile of chef-commenter pairs with more than 1 comment. Here, we conduct robustness checks using two different thresholds – 5 or 10 comments – to examine the sensitivity of our results to our definition of commenter loyalty. These two thresholds generate datasets of 40608 and 14440 chef-commenter pairs, respectively. Figures E.4 and E.5 report the difference in comment rate before and after October 2023 for each definition of loyal followers and for each chef category. While the average weekly comment rate varies depending on threshold, there are large dropoffs in comment rate following October 7th for the treated groups (Israeli and Palestinian chefs) as well as MENA chefs. These results are consistent with those reported in Figure 5.

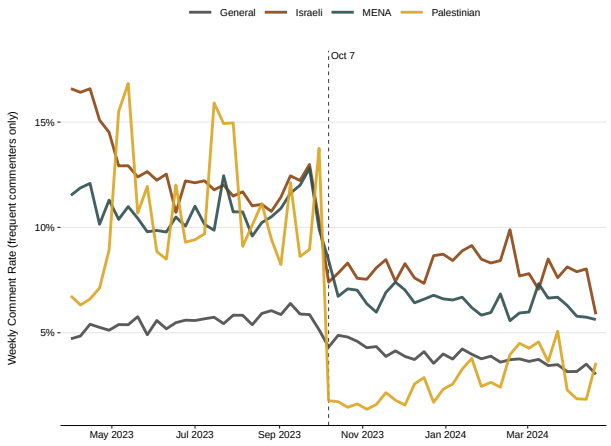


Figure E.4: Engagement: Loyal followers only (commented on at least 5 posts before the conflict)

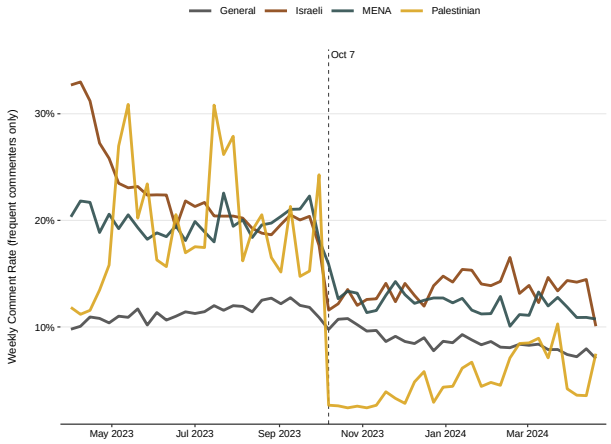


Figure E.5: Engagement: Loyal followers only (commented on at least 10 posts before the conflict)

E.5 Effects of Chef Politicization on Loyal Followers

We present regression analysis of the effect of chef politicization on loyal follower engagement in the pre-October 7th and post-October 7th periods.[39] For this analysis, we construct a dataset at the chef-commenter-period level, where periods aggregate account activity prior to and following October 7th, 2023, and the outcome is the average comment rate. We run OLS regression on a model with chef fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the chef level (Table E.4). We interact a period indicator with different versions of a "treatment" indicator: whether or not the chef account is Israeli or Palestinian; whether it posted political content; and how its level of political content changed from the pre- to post-October 7th period (degree of politicization, as depicted ordinally in Figure 6). We find confirmation that Palestinian and Israeli chefs experienced a significant reduction in loyal commenter engagement following the start of conflict. We find a similar negative effect for chefs who posted any content related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, we find that the degree of politicization has a particularly strong impact on engagement: going from 0% to 100% political content predicts a reduction of 17 percentage points in comment rate from loyal followers.

Table E.4: Politicization and Loyal Follower Disengagement

	Average comment rate		
		(2)	(3)
Post 10/7/23	-0.049***	-0.043***	-0.047***
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Post 10/7/23:Isr. or Pal. Chef	-0.034**		
	(0.010)		
Any Political Content		0.005	
		(0.016)	
Post 10/7/23:Any Political Content		-0.038**	
		(0.014)	
Post 10/7/23:Prop. Increase in Political Content			-0.173***
			(0.037)
N	39633	39633	39602
R2	0.344	0.345	0.344
R2 Adj.	0.336	0.337	0.336
Std.Errors	by: username	by: username	by: username
Chef FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

[39] We use the 8-comment threshold for defining loyal followers, as in the main text.

To visualize these dosage effects more clearly, Figure E.6 disaggregates the relationship between politicization intensity and loyal follower disengagement by the type of political content introduced. The figure shows how the average change in comment rate among loyal followers varies as a function of how much pro-Israel or pro-Palestine political content chefs introduced post-conflict. Generally, we see similar patterns across the two groups. Both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli content shifts are met with similar levels of loyal follower dropoff, increasing in the intensity of politicization.

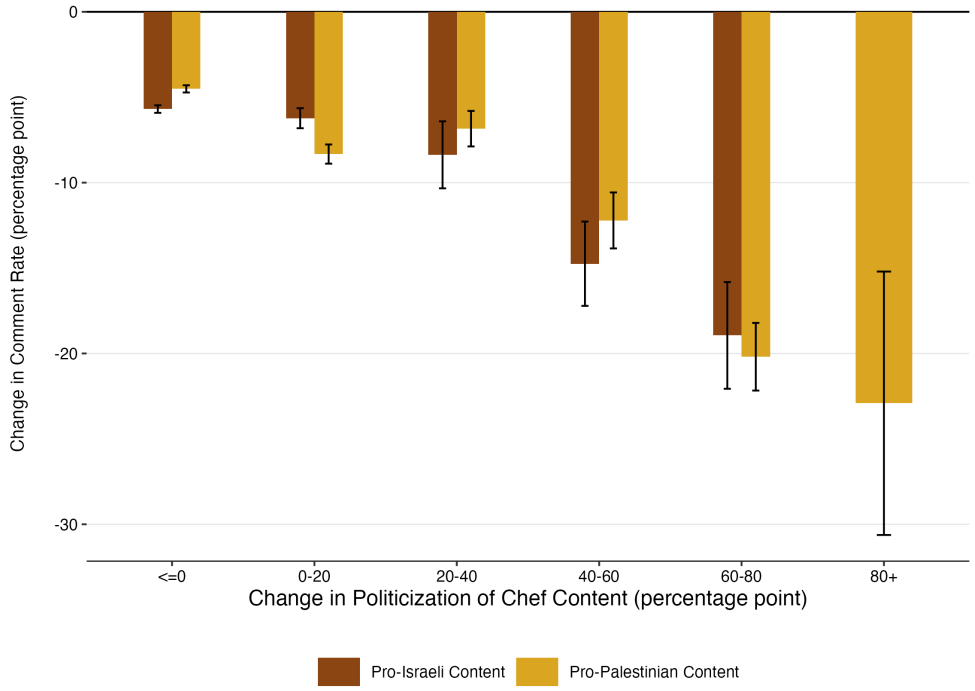


Figure E.6: Supply-side Engagement: Intensity of actor politicization and engagement, loyal followers only. Figure reports the average change in comment rate among loyal followers as a function of how much political pro-Israel or pro-Palestine content is introduced.

F Online-to-Offline Spillover Effects

Our data collection focuses on social media activity within the Instagram platform, documenting systematic shifts in communication patterns and audience responses among Israeli and Palestinian chef-influencer accounts following the October 7th conflict outbreak. While the observed effects are substantial in magnitude, reflecting meaningful behavioral changes in the digital sphere, a critical question remains: do these online transformations extend beyond social media platforms into tangible real-world activities?

The relationship between digital and offline activism operates through multiple channels. Fundraising and charitable donations represent one of the most direct connections, as influencers engaged in real-world fundraising frequently leverage their online platforms to promote these activities. Our analysis reveals evidence of this digital-to-physical spillover: 4% of politically classified posts referenced fundraising, charity, or donations, compared to only 0.3% of non-political posts. At the account level, 15% of chefs (93 out of 617) posted about fundraising activities at least once before October 7th; this proportion increased to 27% following the conflict's onset.

Chef-influencers' offline activism manifests through diverse channels: directing followers to established charitable organizations, organizing independent fundraising events such as charity dinners or cooking classes, or providing direct food assistance to conflict-affected individuals. A prominent example in our dataset is José Andrés, founder of World Central Kitchen, a nonprofit providing global food relief efforts.

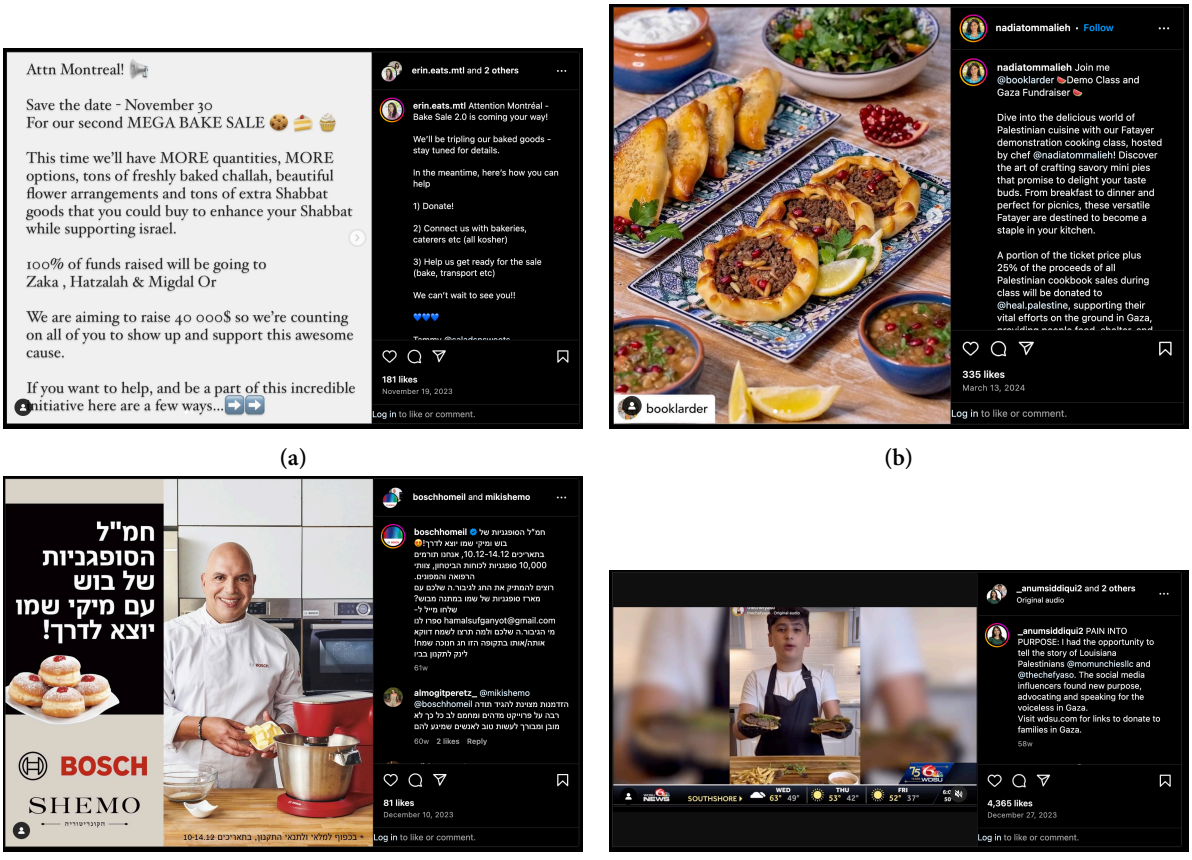


Figure F.1: Examples of social media activity diffusing into real-world action.

Figure F.1 illustrates four cases where social media accounts appear to facilitate offline engagement. These include fundraising through bake sales (panel a) and cooking classes (panel b), food donations to Israeli military personnel (panel c), and information dissemination via local news media appearances (panel d). While quantifying the scope and impact of such offline activities remains challenging due to their varied nature and our focus on social media data, these examples suggest that some chef-influencers use their digital platforms to promote real-world activities among their followers. These preliminary observations indicate potential connections between online political expression and offline engagement. However, establishing causal relationships between digital activism and tangible political participation would require additional data collection and analysis beyond the scope of this study. Future research examining offline outcomes more systematically could provide stronger evidence for whether and how online actor drift translates into meaningful real-world political mobilization.