

Representation of Children in the Ukrainian Crisis: A Multimodal Critical Discourse
Analysis of UNICEF's Instagram posts

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, humanitarian organizations have grown significantly in size and influence, playing a crucial role in providing aid and relief to communities affected by crises, such as invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which displaced more than 4.3 million children. Within this, UNICEF stands out as the largest organization dedicated to children's well-being. To deliver international aid, organizations like UNICEF rely on voluntary public and private funding. Consequently, they use public communication to raise awareness, inform, and garner support from their audiences across various channels, with an increasing emphasis on social media. Instagram, in particular, offers an opportunity for humanitarian organizations to engage audiences through visually appealing content and interactive features. UNICEF's Instagram account (@unicef), with 11.5 million followers, frequently posts about humanitarian issues, notably calling for donations and support for children and families affected by the war in Ukraine.

Given UNICEF's prominent position in humanitarian efforts and the growing reliance on social media for communication, this study investigates UNICEF's portrayal of children affected by the Ukraine crisis on Instagram. Using multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), 150 Instagram posts were both textually and visually analyzed. The results indicate that UNICEF predominantly employed deliberate positivist appeals, with 'shock effect' appeals being prominent in the initial three months of the conflict, followed by a shift towards deliberate positivist appeals. Throughout different phases, children were depicted as vulnerable and/or resilient and purposeful, often portrayed as 'ideal victims' with a focus on humanitarian themes in visual representation.

The findings align with a shift away from shock-based communication in humanitarianism towards more positive representations of children. However, they also highlight the persistent portrayal of children as passive recipients of Western aid, reinforcing an "us/them" dichotomy. Despite this, there exists a notable lack of research on how crisis-affected individuals, especially children, are portrayed in humanitarian contexts, particularly on social media. Thus, this study addresses an empirical gap by examining a recent humanitarian crisis with a focus on children, shedding light on how organizations use

representation strategies to achieve their goals, bridging the gap between humanitarianism and communication. Additionally, the study offers intriguing insights, as the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, being a Western crisis, differs from typical cases.

KEYWORDS: *Humanitarian communication; media representation; children; Instagram; UNICEF.*

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1. Introduction

Recent global events, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, have brought attention to the escalation of violent conflicts worldwide. Among the most vulnerable demographics in such crises are children, who are often subjected to severe violence and displacement (Bürgin et al., 2022, p. 845). Since the escalation of the war in Ukraine, 78 children have been killed, 105 injured, and 3.4 million displaced—representing half of Ukraine's child population (UNICEF Ukraine, 2022). Therefore, prioritizing their protection and support becomes imperative, underscoring the key role of child-focused humanitarian organizations (Wessels & Edgerton, 2008, p. 2). Within these, UNICEF stands out as the world's largest organization dedicated to children's well-being (Lafond, 1994, p. 343), operating across over 190 countries and territories. Its scope encompasses areas such as child health and nutrition, access to safe water and sanitation, and educational initiatives (UNICEF, n.d.a). As a specialized agency under the United Nations (UN), UNICEF receives significant funding from its partners, as evidenced by its commitment of \$265 million to assist children and families affected by the Ukrainian crisis (UNICEF, 2023, p. 1). However, like its counterparts in the humanitarian sector, UNICEF relies on voluntary contributions, from the public and the private sector, such as governments, intergovernmental organizations, foundations, and individuals (UNICEF, 2023, p. 40). This highlights the importance for humanitarian organizations to employ strategic public relations tactics to gain support and secure funding from its stakeholders (Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 1).

Major global humanitarian organizations hold significant influence in shaping the dissemination of crisis information and eliciting emotional responses from Western audiences (Wright, 2018, p. 86). For decades, children have remained a focal point of communication for these organizations (Hart, 2023, p. 1), reflecting the widespread perception that they possess a unique ability to capture audience attention (Seu, 2015, p. 654). This prevailing perception often portrays children as innocent and vulnerable, positioning them as 'ideal victims' (Seu, 2015, p. 654) who require intervention and protection from adults, thereby enhancing fundraising potential. Consequently, the portrayal of children allows humanitarian organizations to streamline complex issues into simplistic narratives, ultimately evoking emotional responses from Western audiences and furthering the institutional goals of humanitarian organizations (Hesford & Shuman, 2011, p. 316).

Scholarship on humanitarian communication has identified diverse trends and shifts in strategies utilized by these organizations across time. Research highlights the use of shock

tactics to evoke emotional reactions, intentional efforts to humanize crisis-affected individuals through positive narratives, and a transition towards post-emotional appeals, influenced by the rise of online platforms (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 107; Hart, 2023, p. 2; Ongenaert et al., 2023, p. 3801). Nevertheless, scholarly inquiry into communication strategies within the humanitarian sphere remains limited (Villa et al., 2017, p. 127), particularly regarding the representation of affected children (Dupraz, 2023, p. 30). This is especially pertinent when examining the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis as a distinctive occurrence within the Global North. Scholars have argued that the portrayal of victims of the Ukrainian conflict, predominantly European, white, and Christian, contrasts with those in non-Western areas like Syria, who are typically non-European and non-Christian (el-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024, p. 1).

In this context, the outcomes of this study could serve to investigate whether the portrayal of children impacted by a crisis in the Global North diverges from the conclusions drawn in prior research on humanitarian depictions of affected children, predominantly centred on crises in the Global South. By juxtaposing empirical findings with existing literature, this research aims to make a valuable academic contribution to the broader discourse. Furthermore, given the recent decline in engagement among Western audiences (Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 2), it is pertinent to examine how UNICEF has adapted its communication strategies to align with its objectives and navigate evolving audience dynamics.

The emergence of communication technologies presents opportunities for aid organizations to extend their reach and foster sustained engagement (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 3). Humanitarian organizations increasingly leverage social media as a cost-effective means to connect with diverse audiences, including donors, volunteers, and the general public (Given et al., 2013, p. 1). Through various online platforms, humanitarian organizations can enhance their visibility, interact with supporters and the public, all at a low cost (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 3). Social media's interactive nature is recognised for its effectiveness in fostering dialogue and cultivating a participatory culture (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009, p. 67). Among these platforms, Instagram, one of the most widely used web-based social networking platforms globally, has revolutionised personal photography by transitioning it to the mobile domain, thereby introducing a novel medium for social and visual communication (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 8). Features such as liking and commenting on social media facilitate symmetrical communication, enabling organizations to tailor content to suit

audience preferences (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 8). UNICEF, with 11.5 million Instagram followers, exemplifies this trend, using social media for communication and fundraising, making it a relevant platform for analysis.

Nonetheless, despite the growing emphasis on social media research (Elhajjar & Yacoub, 2024, p. 1), there exists a lack of literature on the communication strategies of humanitarian organizations concerning their use of social media platforms. Previous studies on humanitarian communication have predominantly focused on conventional communication methods like photographs, press releases, news stories, and reports (Ongenaert et al., 2023, p. 164; Yahefu, 2016, p. 33). This underscores the necessity for further investigation into how organizations in this sector devise and execute strategic communication strategies (Duong, 2017, p. 120). Such insights could assist humanitarian organizations in refining their social media promotional endeavours and broadening their audience outreach. Furthermore, analyzing the portrayal of crisis-affected children on Instagram could offer insights into whether this differs from findings in previous research on humanitarian representations of affected children across other communication channels. Comparing the empirical findings of this study with existing literature would thus represent another valuable academic contribution to the broader discourse.

Recognizing these existing gaps in the literature, it becomes evident that it is necessary to further explore how UNICEF has represented children affected by the Ukrainian crisis on its Instagram. Therefore, this research poses the following question: How has UNICEF represented children in the Ukrainian crisis in its Instagram posts of 2022? To answer this question, the study employed multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 7), to examine a selection of 150 UNICEF Instagram posts spanning from the inception of the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis from February 24th, 2022, to August 16th, 2023. The study's framework includes a literature review that first examines the societal context surrounding humanitarian organizations, their communication strategies, and prevalent representation methods, with a particular focus on how children are portrayed. It then progresses to scrutinize the social media tactics adopted by these organizations and the concept of visual communication, followed by an exploration of Instagram communication and its primary affordances. The research methodology is then discussed, covering MCDA, sampling and data collection, the data analysis process, and potential limitations. Ultimately, the study concludes by furnishing a response to the research question, drawing upon the findings and analyses conducted throughout the research process.

2. Theoretical Framework

The literature review discusses societal trends shaping humanitarian organizations, including political influences on entities like UNICEF. Understanding these influences is vital for analysing UNICEF's portrayal of children affected by the Ukrainian crisis. The review then explores how humanitarian organizations use public communication to shape perceptions and secure funding. It examines diverse representation strategies, focusing on children, to understand effective imagery. Additionally, it scrutinizes the visual-centric approach in humanitarian advertising, contextualizing it within the visual age and aesthetic society.

2.1 Humanitarian Organizations and Key Societal Trends

Humanitarian organizations provide aid and relief to communities impacted by crises, disasters, or conflict (Ada & Abdullahi, 2022, p. 3). They are typically recognised for their aim of independence, neutrality, impartiality, and non-profit status, all aimed at collaborating to deliver international aid to communities facing crises (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005, p. 675). Humanitarian entities span a diverse spectrum, from grassroots advocacy groups to global institutions with broad international influence, incorporating UN agencies, NGOs, governments, and increasingly, private sector participants (OCHA, 2021). Nevertheless, UN humanitarian bodies such as UNICEF operate with less autonomy due to adherence to UN policies set by member States (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005, p. 684). This dynamic subjects UNICEF to political sensitivities and diplomatic relations among member states, influencing decisions on program implementation, advocacy, and partnerships. Despite these constraints, UNICEF maintains significant financial independence through robust fundraising efforts, leveraging its child-focused mission to effectively communicate its goals and support humanitarian and developmental initiatives (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005, p. 684).

Since the 1980s, NGOs, including humanitarian organizations, have experienced rapid expansion (Brass et al., 2018, p. 1). This growth has posed challenges in conceptualising the idea of a humanitarian community, as it presupposes a cohesion that is often only loosely apparent, leading to persistent variations in program approaches and operational procedures (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005, p. 675). This has led to the development of cooperation schemes, such as the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) at the UN-Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the establishment of central coordination bureaus for

cooperating relief agencies at or near humanitarian emergency sites (Topçu, 1999, p. 1). Besides their numeric proliferation, humanitarian organizations have alongside transitioned from traditional relief roles to becoming influential actors in global governance, impacting policy decisions (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002, p. 231). To address the growing global demand for assistance, government humanitarian agencies and non-governmental actors have established extensive cooperation mechanisms (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002, p. 234). However, this collaboration has sparked concerns regarding the principles of impartiality and neutrality upheld by humanitarian organizations, as governments are perceived to be using aid as a strategic tool to advance political objectives (Frangonikolopoulos, 2005, p. 52).

As humanitarian aid becomes increasingly integrated into governments' comprehensive strategies to address conflicts, reduce violence, and foster liberal development (Vaux, 2006, p. 240), humanitarian organizations face criticism for their growing reliance on government funding and lack of adequate accountability mechanisms. This reliance has led to accusations of aid organizations being influenced by governments and operating as profit-driven entities that prioritise financial gain over humanitarian principles, with humanitarian crises often exploited as focal points for donors and media agendas (Frangonikolopoulos, 2005, p. 49). Moreover, unlike elected officials or corporations accountable to shareholders, aid organizations often serve as self-appointed advocates for marginalised issues or groups, potentially leading to actions that fail to accurately reflect or satisfy the population (Dempsey, 2011, p. 328). Their increasing global influence underscores the need for an examination of their accountability (Yaziji & Doh, 2009, p. 26). Additionally, Yaziji and Doh (2009, p. 60) contend that for aid organizations to exert influence over businesses and political entities, specific conditions must be met, highlighting the disparities in both their number and their impact between the Global North and South (Teegen et al., 2004, p. 471). As a result, humanitarian organizations are recognised as stakeholders who both exert influence on and are influenced by other actors (Bridges, 2010, p. 1251), suggesting that their public communication is shaped by broader political and societal trends (Ongenaert, 2019, p. 196).

Over the past two decades, humanitarian organizations have undergone a significant transformation, departing from the traditional 'charity' model and aligning themselves more closely with the mainstream media framework, leading to a fusion of their operations (Wright, 2018, p. 86). This shift has intensified competition among general charities for public donations, prompting them to adopt market-oriented approaches and implement management and marketing strategies (Bennett & Gabriel, 2003, p. 276). Consequently,

humanitarian organizations now operate with a level of professionalism resembling businesses, setting performance targets, and employing skilled professionals such as fundraisers, marketers, campaigners, and CEOs (Saxton, 2004, p. 188). Additionally, an increasing number of humanitarian organizations enlist journalists to actively contribute to news creation, resulting in a convergence of culture and structure with mainstream media (Wright, 2018, p. 86). This trend is evident as aid organizations increasingly incorporate journalistic techniques, such as utilizing visually compelling imagery, crafting elaborate narratives, and leveraging celebrity humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 1).

Celebrity humanitarianism involves entertainment stars, including film, rock, and TV celebrities, as well as philanthropic figures, participating in humanitarian advertisements. Their aim is to raise awareness about humanitarian issues across various platforms, including humanitarian organizations' websites, social media, news outlets, TV shows, and international summits (Kotilainen, 2020, p. 20). Celebrities rally support and donations for affected communities by invoking a sense of community and empathy and leveraging fan activism. They communicate the voice of distant suffering as an urgent, moving message, a strategy known as 'personification' (Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 5). This approach reinforces a sense of global citizenship transcending national borders, fostering emotional connections between donors in the West and individuals in need of humanitarian aid (Mitchell, 2016, p. 288). UNICEF was among the first organizations to enlist Goodwill Ambassadors (UNICEF, n.d.b). Numerous celebrities serve as UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors, participating in efforts to raise awareness, mobilize support, protect children's rights, and promote UNICEF's actions (UNICEF, n.d.b). Notably, Hollywood actress Priyanka Chopra Jonas has been a Goodwill Ambassador since 2016, engaging in various UNICEF missions worldwide and actively participating on the organization's social media platforms (UNICEF, 2016). This highlights the need to explore how UNICEF, as a UN agency, has adapted its communication strategies within a marketing-oriented framework to raise awareness, gain support, and secure funding for its efforts in the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis, potentially diverging from purely humanitarian approaches.

2.2 Humanitarian Organizations & Public Communication

Humanitarian organizations are seen as promoting global connections rooted in a shared sense of humanity and moral duty, prompting individuals to recognize the suffering of distant others as their concern (Nolan & Mikami, 2013, p. 55). This ability to shape Western

perspectives on crises or involved parties significantly impacts funding (Wright, 2018, p. 96), underscoring the imperative for these organizations to deploy effective communication strategies, given their dependence on voluntary contributions (UNICEF, 2023, p. 40).

Humanitarian communication is described as the rhetorical methods employed by international actors who address universal moral principles, such as the concept of a global civil society, to prompt responses to human suffering (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 108). In general, humanitarian organizations utilize public communication to enhance their visibility, inform, raise awareness, and shape agendas, aiming to gain support from the public, political entities, funders, and/or practical assistance (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005, p. 674). Usually, this communication unfolds across diverse channels including publications, advertisements, and various content formats disseminated at public events, conventional media channels, and increasingly prevalent online platforms such as websites and social media (Macnamara, 2016, p. 2).

The emergence of communication technologies presents opportunities for aid organizations to extend their reach and foster sustained engagement (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 7). Web-based communication is particularly advantageous for humanitarian organizations with limited advertising budgets (Kent et al., 2003, p. 63). Moreover, social media, unlike traditional media encompasses interactive features, such as liking, commenting, and sharing content, allowing for symmetrical communication (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 3). Symmetrical communication is generally referred to as “a balanced flow of communication whereby all parties are communicating with each other as equals, seeking to maintain a relationship based on mutual understanding and needs” (Starks & Watson, 2007, p. 67). Therefore, this empowers humanitarian organizations through tailoring their content to audience interests, increase their visibility, and interact with sponsors and the public at a low cost (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 3).

2.3 Humanitarian Representation Strategies

Scholarly research on humanitarian communication has identified an evolution in strategies over time, encompassing three movements: the ‘shock effect,’ deliberate positivism, and post-humanitarian sensibility (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 107). Humanitarian organizations primarily use shock effect appeals and deliberate positivity to morally justify solidarity based on human vulnerability, relying on a universal sense of shared humanity that

transcends political and cultural differences (Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 4). However, Chouliaraki (2010, p. 107). pointed out gradual, non-linear shifts from these humanitarian discourses to post-humanitarian ones. These shifts address concerns about the moral deficit of ‘common humanity’ as a basis for solidarity, moving away from focusing on refugees and towards centering the self as the primary object of cognition and emotion. This approach relies on a morality of contingency, where the ‘Self’ serves as a moral basis for solidarity with distant sufferers, especially in digital media (Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 4). Overall, the discursive strategies employed by global organizations significantly shape individuals’ understanding of humanitarian crises and construct the identities of those represented in this discourse (Johnson, 2011, p. 1017). Consequently, these strategies influence the emotional reactions of Western citizens towards them (Wright, 2018, p. 86).

2.3.1 The ‘Shock Effect’

During the surge of aid organizations in the 1980s and 1990s, the ‘shock effect’ was a popular strategy employed to elicit powerful emotional reactions from Western audiences (Dogra, 2007, p. 162). Shock effect appeals are often the most effective in generating awareness and financial support, especially for humanitarian emergencies (Aung & Inn, 2019, p. 81; Scott, 2014, p. 141). This strategy primarily relies on the use of shocking close-up imagery depicting vulnerable individuals in ‘plain reality’ devoid of humanising features such as their gender and age, and clothing (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110). At the core of the ‘shock effect’ strategy lies the concept of the ‘ideal victim’, characterized as innocent individuals who epitomise humanity (Fair & Parks, 2001, p. 40). The portrayal of the ideal victim is focused on the suffering of especially women and children. The Ethiopian famine between 1984-1985 is recognised as an important event in shaping Western perceptions of Africa as it saw a widespread dissemination by global humanitarian campaigns of shocking images of starving and suffering children (Clark, 2008, as cited in de Jong, 2018, p. 15). The powerful image of the starving African child became ‘the universal icon of suffering’ (Cohen, 2001, as cited in de Jong, 2018, p. 15). These images make the story dramatic enough to be seen as newsworthy. This strategy shows similarities to the factors that define media logics, where the images have the purpose to emphasize emotion.

While these impactful images were acknowledged for their efficacy in raising public awareness at the time, the ‘shock effect’ strategy has faced criticism for various reasons. First, some argue that while such imagery may incite viewers’ curiosity, this curiosity stems

from the fetishizing of the represented individuals, evoking both repulsion and attraction (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110). Similarly, regarding the Ethiopian famine, scholars argue that there was a predominant focus on aid efforts rather than solely on the famine itself. This created a contrast between passive Ethiopian victims and the active involvement of philanthropic endeavours (Clark, 2008, as cited in de Jong, 2018, p. 15). This situation highlights the concept of the 'white saviour complex', where individuals from developed countries, often white, perceive themselves as messianic figures obligated to rescue people and bring civilization to 'backward' areas (Cooney-Petro, 2019, p. 4). Criticized for its paternalistic and colonial undertones, this mindset reinforces power imbalances, diminishes agency, and perpetuates stereotypes of white superiority (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 111). It implies that if the Other is not only suffering but also deemed incapable of securing their own human rights, intervention by a saviour becomes necessary (Lievise Adriaanse, 2016, p. 11).

As such, 'shock effect' imagery tend to frequently oversimplifying crisis and emergency discourses which emphasize the severity of humanitarian situations (Johnson 2011, as cited in Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 4). This establishes a social dynamic characterized by a disconnect between the Western viewer and the suffering other, as Chouliaraki (2010, p. 111) observes. This approach adopts a 'victim-oriented' stance, drawing attention to the distant sufferer or the 'other' as the central focus, thereby reinforcing a social divide rooted in the colonial gaze and accentuating the separation between the observer and the afflicted individuals.

Second, the long-term effectiveness of using highly emotive imagery in emergency communication has become problematic due to 'compassion fatigue' among Western audiences (Seu, 2015, p. 665; Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 2). 'Compassion fatigue' in refers to the emotional exhaustion and desensitization people feel after being repeatedly exposed to distressing images and appeals, leading to fostering a sense of powerlessness and reduced empathy and support for humanitarian causes (Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 4). 'Shock effect' appeals in humanitarian communication evoke pity, guilt and indignation by contrasting the dire conditions of afflicted individuals with the prosperity of Western society (Cohen, 2001, p. 178). Failure to act signifies a denial of individual roles in perpetuating human suffering, and consequently a feeling of complicity. Yet this may inadvertently lead to frustration and resistance towards campaigns, potentially undermining social action for humanitarian causes (Chouliaraki, 2010, as cited in Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 4).

Consequently, the abundance of children's images in humanitarian communications has raised concerns about potential donor desensitization. In a landscape where such imagery is commonplace, there is a risk that emotional impact may diminish over time (Moeller, 1999, as cited in Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 8). Additionally, humanitarian organizations may inadvertently perpetuate white saviour stereotypes by implying Northern donors are pivotal to addressing issues in the Global South. Moreover, these appeals often focus on suffering victims while neglecting or oversimplifying the complex contexts and root causes of their suffering (Scott, 2014, p. 141).

Conversely, some have challenged the criticism of 'shock effect' imagery as it crucial to present this reality to the public. As Cohen (2001, p. 180) asks, if individuals are depicted as not seeking assistance, then why should aid be extended to them? Nonetheless, the debate surrounding the portrayal of poverty as a form of exploitation has transcended these inquiries. Consequently, the General Assembly of European aid organizations adopted a Code of Conduct urging humanitarian entities to avoid using pathos-inducing images that perpetuate biases and reinforce a sense of Northern superiority. Nonetheless, Tavernor (2019, p. 224) notes that humanitarian advertisements from humanitarian organizations still often depict isolated suffering children in need of a 'saviour'.

2.3.2 Deliberate Positivism

In response to the criticism of 'shock effect' strategies and the change in guidelines for representations within humanitarian campaigns, positive imagery became prevalent, leading to the deliberate positivism trend. These campaigns emphasized the agency and dignity of those experiencing hardship, showcasing the effects of donors' contributions, humanizing crisis-affected individuals, and emphasizing their narratives (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). In contrast to the feeling of complicity elicited through 'shock effect' imagery, deliberate positivism encompasses an affective regime as its moralising function relies on sympathy rather than guilt or shame (Boltanski, 1999, as cited in Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). This sympathetic equilibrium is created through representing the suffering individuals as grateful for their donors, which in turn leads to the donors' empathy toward the grateful sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112).

Although this strategy departs from the 'shock effect' trend as it humanizes the individuals in need of help from the West, critiques have pointed out several issues. Despite

providing insights into global disparities, this strategy and its imageries overlook important complexities, such as the hegemony of neoliberal politics, the competitive NGO landscape, dynamics of marketization and mediatization, problematic NGO-local regime ties, and the common absence of local infrastructures, often leading to development failures (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 113). As such, the positive representation perpetuates the perception of aid recipients as lacking agency, reliant on Western donors, thus reinforcing the separation between ‘us’, the West, and ‘them’ or the ‘other’ simultaneously disempowering distant sufferers by appropriating their otherness within Western discourses of identity and agency (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 113).

Therefore, this strategy moves away from the critiques on ‘shock effect’ imagery without addressing the underlying colonialist constructions within this strategy and maintains a social distance between those in need and the donors. Moreover, although this strategy moved from depicting starving and suffering individuals to rather smiling and happy recipients, it still places children as a central focus, thus positioning them as ‘ideal victims’ (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). Consequently, it has been argued that deliberate positivism is a different version of the stereotypical representation of poverty, which still ignores the underlying power and ideology structures that shape such humanitarian campaigns. The circumstances of aid recipients are simplified, with a focus on the positive results of the Western aid (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112).

2.3.3 Post-Humanitarian Sensibility

The transition to a post-humanitarian sensibility marks a departure from emotional to post-emotional appeal strategies influenced by online communication in how humanitarian organizations and actors interact with stakeholders (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 117). Post-humanitarianism, characterized by low-intensity emotional regimes and a shift in the role of photorealism, maintains the use of suffering imagery in humanitarian appeals while disengaging public action from pity and inviting spectator reflexivity regarding the possibility or desirability of intervention. This new sensibility in humanitarian communication breaks the traditional link between witnessing suffering and feeling for the sufferer, emphasizing individual judgment rather than moral discourse in determining the cause for action.

This shift entails a broader recognition of the complex and evolving nature of humanitarian crises, as well as the inadequacies of conventional approaches to tackling them. Moreover, the increased competition between aid organizations led by the need to create a strong and powerful brand to stand out from others and reach the public have shaped how

these adapt their communication strategies to reach as many people as possible (Vestergaard, 2013, p. 2). As a result, aid organizations have adjusted their communication methods, integrating business tactics such as marketing and advertising to optimize the dissemination of their messages (Hoijer, 2004, p. 514).

Brand awareness is an important element within post-humanitarian sensibility, wherein aid organizations seek to differentiate themselves by promoting their brand and seeking attention from the public (Cottle & Nolan, 2007, p. 862). Through shaping humanitarian organizations into brands, donors can identify with the values and actions of these organizations (Vestergaard, 2008, p. 36), thus reinforcing their loyalty. Another important element of post-humanitarian sensibility is the focus on accountability and transparency, which are key factors in reinforcing and legitimising the creation of a strong brand by showing the public what the organization does exactly, and what it believes in (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 115).

In this context, scholars have highlighted a shift in humanitarian communication, as it increasingly aligns with the framework of mainstream news media, thereby blurring the boundaries between the two (Wright, 2018, p. 86). A growing number of aid organizations employ journalists to actively participate in the creation of news, resulting in a blending of culture and structure with mainstream media (Wright, 2018, p. 86). This trend is evident as aid organizations increasingly adopt journalistic logic, such as using visually appealing imagery, crafting elaborate narratives, and leveraging celebrity advocacy (Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 1). Nonetheless, the post-humanitarian sensibility strategy has also faced criticism, particularly for its emphasis on brand awareness, which is said to be performed at the expense of a deeper comprehension of humanitarian efforts and the perspectives of aid recipients (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 117; Scott, 2014, p. 157). This suggests that shifts in communication tactics and portrayal of crisis victims by aid organizations stem from broader trends in technology, politics, and society (Ongenaert, 2019, p. 196).

In summary, the examination of various representation regimes in humanitarianism provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing and contextualizing representations of children affected by the Ukrainian crisis within this study. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these representation trends are criticized for their failure to adequately address the nuanced complexities inherent in the work of aid organizations (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 118). A prevalent critique highlights the prioritization of Western voices over those

of the individuals experiencing suffering, leading to a distinct ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy, with Western aid being portrayed as the solution, accentuating the perceived dependency of aid recipients, and emphasizing the perceived differences between both parties. Particularly within the shock effect strategy, the representation of suffering children, often depicted as ‘ideal victims’, became widespread through global humanitarian campaigns, yet the long-term use of highly emotive imagery in emergency communication has become problematic due to ‘compassion fatigue’ among Western audiences, leading to disengagement (Seu, 2015, p. 665; Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 2). Therefore, it is relevant to examine the existing humanitarian representation of children and assess whether it has evolved over time.

2.3.4 Humanitarian Representations of Children

For more than a century, humanitarian organizations have placed children at the forefront of their campaigns (Hart, 2023, p. 1). Their prominent presence in humanitarian communication underscores a widespread belief in their unique ability to engage audiences and generates emotions (Seu, 2015, p. 656). Childhood is frequently portrayed as a phase characterized by innocence, passivity, and limited autonomy (Hart, 2023, p. 1). This positions children as ‘ideal victims’ necessitating intervention and protection from adults, as compassion tends to be directed towards those acknowledged as genuine sufferers (Seu, 2015, p. 655). Moreover, their ability to convey emotions through facial expressions, their perceived innocence, and their aesthetic attractiveness make children captivating subjects for visual representations in humanitarian campaigns (Zarzycka, 2016, p. 28). Thus, humanitarian communications depicting suffering children have a powerful emotional resonance, eliciting empathy from audiences and fostering a desire to protect them (Seu, 2015, p. 663). The portrayal of children enables humanitarian organizations to simplify complex issues into straightforward narratives, eliciting emotional responses from Western audiences and advancing the goals of aid organizations (Hesford, 2011, p. 283). Consequently, ‘shock effect’ imagery depicting children suffering or in need was prominent during the rise of aid organizations in the 1980s and 1990s to generate powerful emotional reactions from Western audiences (Dogra, 2007, p. 162). This approach was particularly used during humanitarian emergencies to raise awareness and financial support (, p. 81 & Inn, 2019; Scott, 2014, p. 141).

However, some have questioned the inherent nature of these commonly accepted attributes of childhood. Critics argue that the prevailing depiction of children as innocent,

vulnerable, spontaneous, and requiring nurturing and protection is not natural or universal, but rather a construct of modern Western society (Christensen, 2000, as cited in Meyer, 2007, p. 89). The notion that children are primarily the responsibility of adults and require protection from harm is deeply rooted in modern Western ideologies and practices (O'Dell, 2008, p. 384). These portrayals of a standardized childhood experience may normalize certain childhoods while marginalizing others (Burman, 2005, p. 259) and perpetuate the perception of children from developing regions as inferior to their counterparts in the developed world (Suski, 2009, as cited in Seu, 2015, p. 655). Moreover, the widespread representation of suffering children as 'ideal victims' in global humanitarian campaigns has led to the problematic issue of 'compassion fatigue' among Western audiences, resulting in disengagement (Seu, 2015, p. 665; Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 2). Considering this phenomenon, representation strategies such as the 'shock effect' seems no longer effective for engaging with these issues, underscoring the necessity of achieving a balance between emotional resonance and donor engagement (Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 8).

In response to the oversimplified portrayal of children in need, humanitarian organizations have aimed to refine their representations in campaigns, focusing on more positive appeals that align with deliberate positive strategies (Vasavada, 2016, p. 11). Initially, efforts included adding context to images and captions while striking a balance in revealing details, such as deliberately concealing the faces of child soldiers (Vasavada, 2016, p. 10). Trends in humanitarian communication tend to present more positive depictions of children, highlighting developmental efforts and successes in the developing world (Rashad et al., 2013, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 12). Changes in photographic representations used by UNICEF include fewer images of children engaged in labour, more references to play, and a portrayal of childhood as a time of leisure and play (Clark-Kazak, 2009, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 11). Additionally, there is a shift towards recognizing children as both innocent and purposeful actors, empowering them by giving them a voice in accompanying text (Fass, 2011, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 11). However, certain norms persist in transnational organizations' photographs of children, including a strong emphasis on schooling and mostly healthy bodies (Rashad et al., 2013, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 12). Moreover, children are still often depicted as passive recipients of Western aid (Rashad et al., 2013, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 12), which reinforces their victimization, including on new communication channels used by humanitarian organizations, such as social media.

2.4 Social Media Strategies of Humanitarian Organizations

In addition to changes in children's representation strategies, humanitarian organizations have also adapted their media communication modes to engage with their audience, leveraging communication technologies to broaden their reach and maintain engagement (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 3). This includes an increasing reliance on social media platforms as a cost-effective means to engage with diverse audiences, including donors, volunteers, and the general public (Given et al., 2013, p. 1). This shift, as emphasized by Macnamara (2016, p. 2), enables quicker and broader action by disseminating information to a larger audience compared to traditional media channels. Consequently, social media platforms, such as Instagram, offer humanitarian organizations the chance to amplify their visibility, engage with supporters, and reach the public at minimal expense.

Moreover, social media, as platforms for humanitarian communication, differ significantly from traditional media, fostering dialogue and a participatory culture within humanitarian efforts (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009, p. 67). Their interactive features, such as liking and commenting, facilitate symmetrical communication, enabling organizations to tailor content to audience interests (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 8). This symmetrical communication, characterized by balanced interactions among all parties, influences how donors engage with information and subsequently respond, highlighting the profound impact of social media's nature on humanitarian communication (Starks & Watson, 2007, p. 67).

For example, Chouliaraki (2011, p. 117) discusses the 'technologization of action', suggesting that online activism often promotes easy engagement without long-term commitment, particularly evident on platforms like Instagram, where actions such as sharing, liking, and commenting require minimal time and effort. However, Tavernor (2019, p. 230) points out that social media users engaging with humanitarian content often only see fragments of the communication process, reflecting various inequalities. This limited exposure is influenced by the commercial nature of social media platforms, which often prioritize reaching a wide audience over providing comprehensive context. Tavernor (2019, p. 230) further suggests that time-sensitive practices may prioritize quantity over quality of engagement. This underscores the need to examine how humanitarian organizations portray and shape the identities of children affected by crises on social media, as their communication aims to evoke emotional responses from Western audiences (Wright, 2018, p. 86). However, despite advancements, research on humanitarian communication strategies regarding social

media appears limited, pointing to the need for further research into how humanitarian organizations develop and execute strategic social media communication, including representation strategies. This is crucial as social media, often a visually driven communication platform, has amplified the emphasis on aesthetics, leading to a society where visually pleasing content and services hold increasing importance.

2.5 Visual Age and Aesthetic Society

Humanitarian organizations rely on public communication across various channels, increasingly utilizing social media, which marks a shift from traditional modes like printed ads and newspapers. The long-standing dominance of written texts in culture, particularly in the Western world, has reached its conclusion (Felten, 2008, p. 60). The advent of digital media has brought about a radical transformation in the realm of visual communication (Messaris, 2012, p. 105). Today, the widespread accessibility of computers and digital networks has empowered individuals to create, manipulate, and share images on a scale never seen. This shift, often referred to as the ‘pictorial turn’ signifies that images are no longer merely for entertainment or illustration but are assuming a central role in communication and the construction of meaning (Felten, 2008, p. 60). This evolution has given rise to the concept of visual literacy, which encompasses the ability to comprehend, produce, and utilize culturally significant images, objects, and visible actions (Felten, 2008, p. 60).

Kress (2003, as cited in Felten, 2008, p. 60) challenges the conventional concept of literacy, proposing that it should embrace a wider array of representation modes. Advocates of the ‘multimodal principle,’ like Gee (2004, p. 210, as cited in Felten, 2008, p. 60), stress that meaning and knowledge arise from diverse modalities such as images, texts, symbols, interactions, abstract design, and sound—not exclusively through words. This perspective highlights the significance of being skilled in interpreting various forms of communication beyond verbal language. Similar to how writing is fundamental to textual literacy, the ability to manipulate and derive meaning from images is central to visual literacy. With technological advancements, ordinary individuals, not just professionals, are increasingly able to engage in visual design (Messaris, 2012, p. 103), facilitated by platforms like Instagram (Manovich, 2019, p. 6). In contrast to verbal language, understanding visual images often requires minimal prior experience (Messaris, 2012, p. 103)

In this visual-centric era, there is a growing emphasis on aesthetics, leading to the emergence of what is termed an aesthetic society, where the creation of visually pleasing

consumer goods and services holds increasing significance (Manovich, 2019, p. 1). Within this context, the production of beautiful images, interfaces, objects, and experiences transcends the boundaries of art, becoming a central aspect of both economic endeavours and social identity (Manovich, 2019, p. 5). Aesthetics, once solely associated with art, now defines commercial products and services. As a result, there is a growing appreciation for media professionals including user-experience designers and photographers (Manovich, 2019, p. 5). This trend underscores the shift within humanitarian organizations, which are increasingly engaging journalists and other media experts to produce visually captivating content that resonates more effectively with their audience. This is particularly the case for Instagram, one of UNICEF's primary communication platforms, where visual elements play a central role in user experience and interactions, alongside text elements.

2.6 Instagram Communication and its Key Affordances

In today's social media landscape, the exchange of images, particularly on platforms like Instagram, has become deeply embedded in the overall user experience, marking a significant aspect of the aesthetic society (Manovich, 2019, p. 1). Visual images suggest reality, create causal relationships and foster interaction (Fahmy et al., 2014, as cited in Russmann & Svensson, 2017, p. 2). Considering those social media platforms serve as hubs for social interaction, particularly for younger demographics in Western societies, this emphasis on visual content is fundamentally altering our interpersonal connections and our perception of the world and ourselves (Russmann & Svensson, 2017, p. 1). Social media platforms are evolving into multimodal spaces that accommodate written text, pictures, videos, hashtags, and emoticons, which have conceptual and symbolic uses (Hurley, 2019, p. 2). These elements also facilitate symmetrical communication, allowing content to be tailored to audience interests (McCosker et al., 2018). Symmetrical communication involves a balanced exchange where all users are able to interact equally, aiming to maintain a relationship grounded in mutual understanding and needs (Starks & Watson, 2007, p. 67). Additionally, these platforms provide users, including humanitarian organizations, with tools for framing, filtering, and editing visual content prior to sharing. This capability allows them to strategically shape and enhance their communication, conveying particular impressions of

themselves, objects, or locations. Consequently, this enriches messages and improves self-representation (Russmann & Svensson, 2017, p. 2).

Within these, Instagram has become one of the most preeminent social networking platforms, with over 2.4 billion active users (SEO.AI, 2024), revolutionizing personal photography into a mobile-centric medium for social and visual communication (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 3). As an image-sharing tool, Instagram allows users to share photos and videos alongside text, making it a crucial instrument for branding, community engagement, and education among humanitarian organizations (Wut et al., 2022, p. 2). The diverse content shared on Instagram serves various purposes, from providing information to expressing opinions, thus shaping notions of nationhood and sparking debates (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 2).

In this context, social media platforms like Instagram play a pivotal role in promoting social justice by providing a space where humanitarian organizations can amplify their voices and raise awareness about pressing issues (Marks, n.d.). The concept of social justice refers to the pursuit of equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for all individuals within a society, ensuring fair distribution of resources and protection of human rights (Marks, n.d.). Through utilizing compelling content, and engagement tools including hashtags, stories, and live streams, these organizations can effectively raise awareness amongst their audience and leverage support (Hurley, 2019, p. 2). Moreover, Instagram facilitates direct interaction and dialogue between organizations, activists, and the public, enabling the sharing of personal stories, experiences, and perspectives that contribute to a deeper understanding of social justice issues. In essence, Instagram acts as a catalyst for social justice by empowering individuals and organizations, such as UNICEF to leverage the platform's visibility and connectivity to drive positive social change (Marks, n.d.).

3 Research Design and Methods

This study employs a comprehensive methodological approach to investigate UNICEF's communication strategies and portrayal of children affected by the Ukrainian crisis in its Instagram posts. The chapter provides an overview of the methods and approaches used in scrutinizing these posts, aiming to clarify the chosen methodology, detail data collection and analysis procedures, and address potential design limitations.

3.1 Methodological Approach

To address the research question posed in the introduction, a qualitative research approach will be employed, which proves suitable given the nature of the method. Scholars like Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p. 31) emphasized that qualitative research adopts an interpretive, naturalistic approach, studying phenomena within their natural settings and interpreting them based on the meaning individuals attribute to them. Besides its subjective and primarily inductive nature, qualitative research adheres to several principles particularly relevant to the analysis of the Instagram posts under scrutiny. The first principle emphasizes the comprehensive analysis of the underlying meanings within the content and messages (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 1). This approach prioritizes quality over quantity, aiming for a deeper understanding and interpretation of the data rather than simply counting occurrences of a phenomena. The second principle highlights that qualitative methods often utilize purposive sampling to select units of analysis rather than random selection (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 2). This implies that rather than selecting units of analysis or respondents randomly, they are deliberately chosen based on the requirements of the study. In this study, the units of analysis, namely the Instagram posts, are gathered according to specific criteria outlined in the data collection section. The third and final key principle of qualitative research pertinent to this thesis concerns the nature of the data generated from the analysis. The research question guiding this research begins with ‘how’, meaning that an interpretative and critical answer will be given. Therefore, the conclusion will entail an account of UNICEF’s depiction of children impacted by the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis in its Instagram posts. Furthermore, the approach utilized in this study holds practical relevance. The insights derived from applied research are leveraged to enact real-world changes, such as applying acquired knowledge to initiate transformation. This holds true for the present research, as the findings summarized in the conclusion can serve to raise awareness about communication strategies within the humanitarian sector, prompting action and inspiring further research.

3.2 Method

By employing Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), this study investigates UNICEF’s communication efforts in portraying children affected by the Ukrainian crisis on Instagram. MCDA is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines text-based modes of communication, such as newspapers, speeches, and advertisements. CDA

recognizes the power dynamics inherent in language and seeking to uncover underlying meanings and structural connections (Fairclough, 1995, p. 6). In other words, it seeks to ‘demystify’ discourses and question established meaning-making mechanisms built between language, power, and ideology (Wodak, 2001, p. 303). This critical approach analyzes speech as a component of social practice that both constructs and reflects explicit and implicit meanings, shaping and being shaped by society (Machin & Mayr, 2013, p. 356).

Machin and Mayr (2013, p. 360) assert that speakers in discourse have a range of choices in how they portray individuals and groups, commonly termed ‘social actors’ or ‘participants’ in CDA. Within CDA, these choices constitute ‘representational strategies’, as highlighted by Fowler (1991, as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2013, p. 360). Such choices enable the positioning of individuals within the societal context, emphasizing certain aspects of their identity while potentially obscuring others. Each choice carries implicit sets of ideas, values, and attitudes. Consequently, specific discourses conform to the interests of social actors in particular social contexts (Machin & van Leeuwen 2007, p. 60). Thus, discourses are viewed in CDA as forms of social action. This implies that a discourse, particularly when perpetuated by influential social institutions, can constrain other modes of discourse and knowledge production on the subject.

Fairclough (1995) proposes a CDA model with three interconnected dimensions: object of analysis (verbal/visual elements), processes (production/reception by human subjects), and socio-historical context. In this instance, the second dimension underscores that the researcher’s perception of the Ukrainian crises may impact how they perceive and interpret UNICEF’s portrayal of children in the study. Thus, CDA requires a comprehensive textual analysis of the sampled data alongside an examination of the social conditions surrounding it.

Although CDA conventionally scrutinizes news texts, political speeches, and schoolbooks, scholars in the late 1980s and 1990s began acknowledging that meaning is communicated not solely through language but also through other semiotic modes (Machin & Mayr, 2013, p. 6). Discourse and its underlying ideologies can also be discerned in images, photographs, and drawings (Machin & Mayr, 2013, p. 356). Since Instagram posts are multimodal artefacts, with visuals often taking precedence over verbal language, it is pertinent to explore how these two modes interact to shape UNICEF’s discourse and representation of affected children. Thus, given that discourse encompasses both textual and visual elements, MCDA expands upon CDA by incorporating aspects of critical visual

analysis (CVA), thereby facilitating a more comprehensive analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2013, p. 7).

Within MCDA, analysts aim to illustrate how visual elements contribute to meaning while also contrasting these meanings with those conveyed in accompanying text. Therefore, integrating the analysis of semiotic resources through CVA is essential for this study as they enrich communication by offering nuances that text alone may lack, adding depth to the analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2013, p. 9). This methodology is crucial for attaining a comprehensive understanding of the Instagram posts, as it further allows for the examination of both their explicit and implicit meanings. Thus, MCDA was utilized, integrating aspects of both CDA and CVA (Machin & Mayr, 2013, p. 9).

As outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2013, p. 1), the pervasive impact of mass media globally results in a standardizing effect on visual communication worldwide, emphasizing the need for a critical multimodal approach. Despite Instagram's absence during their time of analysis, and its categorization as social media rather than mass media, its widespread global usage positions it as a platform for disseminating mass media content, thus rendering it pertinent for analysis within a MCDA framework (Saragih & Natsir, 2023, p. 164). As Machin (2013, p. 347) elucidates, discourses permeate various forms of media, including entertainment platforms including Instagram, leading individuals to perceive them as enjoyable or entertaining, potentially obscuring the underlying influence of power dynamics and ideologies across different levels of communication. Modern online communication exemplifies the integration of diverse modes, employing visual elements to convey nuanced ideas and attitudes.

In examining UNICEF's portrayal of children in the Ukrainian crisis within its Instagram posts, it is crucial to recognize the significance of visual communication in contemporary media landscapes. While traditional mediums heavily relied on text for communication, modern equivalents, such as Instagram, employ advanced presentation techniques that incorporate various visual cues (Machin, 2013, p. 348). These cues, including specific font styles, colours, and design elements, are utilized to evoke emotions and convey symbolic messages (Machin, 2013, p. 347). Therefore, when applied to social media platforms such as Instagram, MCDA enables the investigation of how semiotic choices – such as framing, colour, and font type – contribute to the representation of children in the Ukrainian crisis through non-linguistic communicative modes.

3.3 Operationalization

To effectively address the research question, it is essential to provide detailed explanations of the concepts that form the basis of the research question. This ensures clarity and eliminates any confusion regarding the definition of the concepts utilized in this research. Therefore, it is essential to consider the concept of children. According to international law, children are referred to as individuals under the age of 18, and typically constitute half of a population (Wessels & Edgerton, 2008, p. 2). Children can be categorized based on developmental stages, including infants (0-12 months), toddlers (1-3 years old), pre-schoolers (3-5 years old), grade-schoolers (5-12 years old), and teenagers (12-18 years old) (Slater et al., 2014, p. 421). In UNICEF's Instagram posts, these descriptors or the age of the children depicted are sometimes included in the captions, providing valuable textual cues for identifying and categorizing children within this study. Despite potential variations in the representation of children across different categories, the study focused on children as a whole, rather than on specific subcategories, primarily due to the limited data set.

3.4 Data Collection and Sampling

The escalation of the war in Ukraine has displaced approximately 4.3 million children, which represents about half of the country's child population (UNICEF Ukraine, 2022). Considering children's heightened vulnerability to substantial risks such as physical and psychological violence (Council of Europe, 2018) and their significant representation within the Ukrainian population, prioritizing children over other demographic groups is validated within this study. Additionally, the ongoing war in Ukraine, which commenced in February 2022, underscores the relevance of studying this situation. Its recent occurrence and ongoing nature make it particularly pertinent for investigation, as it presents an opportunity for academic inquiry. Although the study did not specify dates within the Ukrainian crisis, it scrutinized 150 crisis-related posts ranging from its onset on February 24th, 2022, to August 16th, 2023, covering a period of approximately a year and a half. The selected time frame was deemed more relevant to scrutinize children's portrayal since it aligned with the onset of the crisis, coinciding with a notable increase in Ukraine-related posts during that period. Additionally, Instagram posts related to Ukraine, which were less prevalent on UNICEF's Instagram page initially, grew in frequency, with daily updates, thereby offering a more suitable and manageable dataset for analysis within the scope of this study.

The choice of a humanitarian organization for examination is paramount given their pivotal role in shaping perceptions and garnering support from Western audiences (Wright, 2018, p. 86). As highlighted by Dempsey (2009, p. 328), the imagery and messaging disseminated by such organizations wield substantial influence over the communities they target, impacting resource allocation and political interventions. Chosen as the focal organization for this study, UNICEF's extensive global presence across more than 190 countries and territories underscores its prominence as a leading humanitarian entity, and most particularly child welfare (Lafond, 1994, p. 343). This selection reflects its substantial influence in the humanitarian landscape. Notably, in 2022, UNICEF reported a total income of \$9,326 million, derived from both public and private sector partners (2023b, p. 3). Among recipient countries, Ukraine ranks in the top 15, receiving a significant portion of UNICEF funds. Notably, Ukraine received 25 percent of UNICEF's total humanitarian funding in 2022, making it the leading recipient and the most well-funded under the Humanitarian Action for Children Appeal (UNICEF, 2023, p. 3). Given Ukraine's prominence as a major beneficiary of UNICEF funding and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the country, this further informs the decision of the researcher to focus on the Ukrainian crisis.

Ukraine's prominence as a major beneficiary of UNICEF funding arose after Russia's invasion on February 24th, 2022. Russia claimed the invasion aimed to protect Russian-speaking populations in Ukraine (Hajda et al., 2024). This attack marked the largest conflict in Europe since World War II (Nagourney et al., 2023), leading to widespread destruction and a severe humanitarian crisis. The root of the Ukraine conflict lies in the long-standing tensions with Russia, particularly since 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea (Hajda et al., 2024). The war has displaced 7.1 million people within Ukraine and caused 10.3 million refugee movements out of the country (Haque et al., 2022, p. 1). The war has also severely impacted healthcare facilities, disrupting the delivery of medical supplies and services, leading to a humanitarian crisis (Haque et al., 2022, p. 1) directly affecting the well-being of children and families (UNICEF Ukraine, 2024). Moreover, issues such as violence, separation from family members and disrupted education, healthcare, and social services became prevalent (UNICEF Ukraine, 2024). Consequently, UNICEF, which was already active in Ukraine before the escalation, has significantly increased its efforts and funding there, making Ukraine a major recipient of UNICEF aid since the conflict began.

In Ukraine, UNICEF operates from its Kyiv office to provide assistance within the country (UNICEF Ukraine, n.d.), generating and distributing media content showcased on its

website and social media platforms, including Instagram. As one of the world's most popular social media platforms, Instagram plays a significant role in conveying photos imbued with powerful symbolism and meaning. This makes Instagram a crucial tool for promoting social justice (Marks, n.d.), as it allows UNICEF to share content related to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, raising awareness and garnering donor support. Given Instagram's importance as a social media platform, its potential for advancing social justice, and its cost-effectiveness and broad reach for humanitarian organizations like UNICEF, it stands out as an essential medium for their efforts.

UNICEF actively engages in fundraising and robust public communication efforts, particularly through its main account (@unicef) which amasses 11.5 million followers. This account, which is the agency's largest social media platform, features multiple daily posts addressing humanitarian issues encompassing both text and visuals. While UNICEF maintains country-specific Instagram accounts, the main page is the focus due to its large reach. Examining a country-specific page, like UNICEF Ukraine, is less suitable as it caters to a Ukrainian audience with posts in the Ukrainian language. Instagram, as a web-based social networking platform, has revolutionized personal photography by migrating it to mobile devices, creating a new medium for social and visual communication (McCosker et al., 2018, p. 3). Functioning as an image-sharing tool, users can post photos and videos accompanied by text, serving various purposes such as information dissemination, entertainment, and opinion expression (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 2).

This study employed purposive sampling, selecting information-rich examples for a thorough investigation (Patton, 2014, p. 52). This approach prioritizes insights and comprehensive understanding over empirical generalizations by using small, predetermined samples (Patton, 2002, p. 52). The data collection process prioritized relevance, leading to the analysis of 150 Instagram posts from UNICEF's primary account. To gather the units of analysis, the researcher utilized their personal Instagram account accessed through the Instagram application on a mobile phone or the webpage on a laptop. This approach was chosen for its convenience, as it eliminated the need to create an additional Instagram account. Each post was carefully selected for its reference to children affected by the Ukrainian crisis. The initial selection of Instagram posts depicting children was based on the researcher's judgment, using visual cues such as school settings, backpacks, and smaller body size to identify infants, toddlers, pre-schoolers, grade-schoolers, and teenagers. Additionally,

this selection was supported by textual cues, which often provided the age of the children depicted.

Most Instagram posts featured multiple photos within a single post, accompanied by text appearing both in the caption and often on the post itself. Reels, which are short videos used by UNICEF, were excluded from the data sampling due to their length and complexity, involving multiple shots rather than a single photo. This intricacy makes them significantly different from regular posts, so the study focuses exclusively on photo-based Instagram posts. Posts consisting solely of quotes or text, without accompanying photos, referencing the children impacted by the Ukrainian crisis were also incorporated. This inclusion was crucial for examining how UNICEF shapes the textual and visual portrayal of children.

3.5 Data Analysis

After collecting the sample, the initial step involved closely examining the chosen Instagram posts to become familiar with them. The data underwent analysis using Microsoft Excel. This software facilitated the organization and visualisation of complex data relationships. The next phase entailed examining written and visual languages utilising lexical and visual representation strategies utilized within MCDA, as outlined by Machin and Mayr (2012, pp. 79-103). Consequently, the analysis is divided into two main sections: the initial part delves into scrutinizing textual elements such as text-based posts or captions, while the subsequent section investigates visual aspects, including photographs. Each post was analyzed separately for its textual and visual representations. In some instances, distinct strategies were identified in the visual and textual elements. However, the overarching representation strategy was determined by the interaction between text and visuals within the analyzed posts. Some posts demonstrated multiple representation strategies. The examination of the Instagram posts revealed thematic saturation within the data. Thematic saturation in this context denotes a consistency in the themes and representation strategies present in the Instagram posts. In essence, UNICEF's Instagram content consistently demonstrated strategies in representing the children impacted by the Ukrainian crisis across its platform. After analyzing approximately 40 percent of the data, the researcher determined which visual

and lexical representation strategies from Machin and Mayr's (2012, pp. 79-96) framework were not relevant to the data analysis. Consequently, these strategies (suppression, use of pronouns, aggregation, anonymization) were excluded from the final data analysis.

The researcher began by analyzing the written language in UNICEF's Instagram posts, using Machin and Mayr's (2012, pp. 79-96) framework to examine how social actors are portrayed. This framework covers various dimensions, including personalization, individualization, specification, generalization, and objectivation. First, the researcher examined aspects of personalization and impersonalization with the textual elements, focusing on whether children are depicted as individuals or abstract entities. Personalization involves the linguistic emphasis on individual agency and identity, achieved using personal pronouns, proper nouns, and other markers attributing actions or qualities to specific individuals or groups (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 79). Conversely, impersonalization includes elements such as impersonal pronouns, passive voice structures, or generic terms that deindividualize discourse by emphasizing actions or events rather than specific individuals. Next, the focus shifted to individualization and collectivization. Individualization highlights specific individuals or groups in discourse, emphasizing their unique characteristics and agency. In contrast, collectivization merges individual identities into broader collective categories, emphasizing commonality over individuality (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 80). The analysis then focused on identifying elements of specification and genericization. Specification provides detailed information about entities, actions, or concepts, enhancing clarity in discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 80-81). Conversely, genericization abstracts entities or concepts into broad categories, simplifying discourse by referring to general characteristics (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 81). Then, aspects of functionalisation were examined, which entails attributing functions or roles to these entities, describing their purposes, responsibilities, or roles within discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 81). Following this, objectivation was examined to determine if individuals or groups were portrayed as passive recipients rather than active agents (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 82-83). Studying the different ways social actors are represented shed light on how children were generally portrayed in comparison to other social actors in the Instagram posts, informing the researcher's understanding.

In the second phase of data analysis, the researcher delved into the visual elements of the Instagram posts. When scrutinizing the visual portrayal of social actors, similar inquiries were made regarding individualization and collectivization. As highlighted by Machin and Mayr

(2013, p. 100), analyzing visual representations necessitates exploring whether participants are depicted in a manner that accentuates their individuality or their group affiliation. Consequently, the researcher assessed whether the children depicted in the Instagram posts appeared in groups or individually. Furthermore, mirroring the textual representation toolkit, aspects of genericization and specification were examined. Thus, the research investigated whether children in UNICEF's Instagram posts were depicted as specific individuals or as generic stereotypes conveyed through clothing, posture, or ethnic characteristics.

Furthermore, Machin and Mayr (2012, pp. 97-100) introduce two vital tools for analyzing representational strategies in visual communication: distance and angle. Distance evaluates the proximity of participants in images, reflecting real-world social dynamics (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 97). This is akin to the 'size of frame' in images, ranging from close, medium, to long shots, signifying various relationships between viewers and social actors (Babaii & Atai, 2016, p. 9). Conversely, angles within visuals offer different modes of engagement with individuals, mirroring real-life interactions (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 98). The horizontal angle determines whether viewers observe individuals from the side or front, while the vertical angle concerns perspectives from below, above, or at eye level. These angles symbolize social relations, with vertical angles suggesting power dynamics and horizontal angles indicating involvement or detachment (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 98). Thus, when assessing the impact on children in UNICEF's Instagram posts, the researcher investigated whether viewers directly confronted them, observed from a distance, or adopted their viewpoint. Like the examination of textual representation, the visual analysis also scrutinized how children were depicted in relation to other social actors in the Instagram posts, contributing to the researcher's comprehension.

3.6 Credibility of the Research

The higher the validity and reliability of the research, the greater its trustworthiness (Rose & Johnson, 2020, p. 1). While offering an in-depth understanding, qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative methods, heavily relies on the researcher's perspectives and analytical skills (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, p. 40). Consequently, validity and reliability are often scrutinized in qualitative research due to its subjective nature, as the analysis relies more on interpretation rather than numerical data and calculations (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). This applies to MCDA, which is characterized by a critical and interpretative mindset, rather than being an explicit, systematic, and reproducible research method. Hence, a significant

challenge in MCDA arises when categories and themes exhibit varying levels of abstraction and interpretation, posing risks to credibility and authenticity (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, p. 41). As a result, several steps were taken to ensure validity and reliability.

First, thorough consideration was given to all textual and visual aspects during the examination of Instagram posts, guaranteeing that the results accurately represent the data (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 34). Every step of MCDA has been followed to assess its applicability to Instagram posts, ensuring thorough investigation while maintain uniformity across all units of analysis. Second, it is crucial in qualitative research to transparently communicate the researcher's stance on the data to the audience (Dodgson, 2019, p. 220). The constraint of inherent bias in subjective viewpoints, which cannot be eliminated, necessitates acknowledgment by both the researcher during the research process and by readers of the final research. The researcher consistently aimed to maintain as much as possible a neutral stance during the data analysis. Moreover, even though direct human research is not conducted, ethical considerations remain paramount, especially considering the involvement of children, recognized as a vulnerable group (Kirk, 2007, p. 1251). Third, enhancing the reliability of qualitative research involves transparently documenting the research process and the theoretical framework used (Golafshani, 2003, p. 603). Therefore, including examples of abstraction and interpretation processes becomes a valuable strategy. Consequently, this paper includes sample quotes and posts, provided in the results section.

4 Results

This chapter presents the findings from analyzing UNICEF's Instagram posts about the representation of children in the Ukraine war from February 22nd, 2022, to August 16th, 2023. The findings are structured chronologically, beginning with posts that use the 'shock effect' strategy, followed by deliberate positive appeals, and concluding with post-humanitarianism. Each section presents the results accordingly and introduces the themes identified within each strategy of representation.

4.1 'Shock Effect' Appeals

UNICEF predominantly employed the 'shock effect' representation strategy in its Instagram posts following the commencement of the Ukraine war in late February 2022. This period extended until around mid-May 2022, amounting to approximately a period of three months. 'Shock effect' appeals in humanitarian communication are designed to evoke strong

emotions such as guilt, shame, and indignation in the audience (Cohen, 2001, p. 187), thereby justifying solidarity through a shared sense of human vulnerability (Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 4). This strategy often involves depicting ‘ideal victims’ (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110), such as suffering children, using emotive language, and presenting them in need of a Western savior (Lievisse Adriaanse, 2016, p. 11). Additionally, the traditional ‘shock effect’ approach tends to dehumanize crisis-affected individuals by presenting them as an anonymous group, excluding personal attributes such as age, gender, and name (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110). The data analysis identified elements of the ‘shock effect’ strategy, such as emotive language and portraying children as vulnerable. However, these posts deviated from typical ‘shock effect’ representations by using moderately impactful visuals and individualizing children through focused visuals and personal information. While some posts retained elements of the shock effect strategy, the findings show UNICEF’s strong reliance on this approach during the onset of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. The next section delves deeper into the specific ‘shock effect’ strategies identified in these posts and explores additional findings.

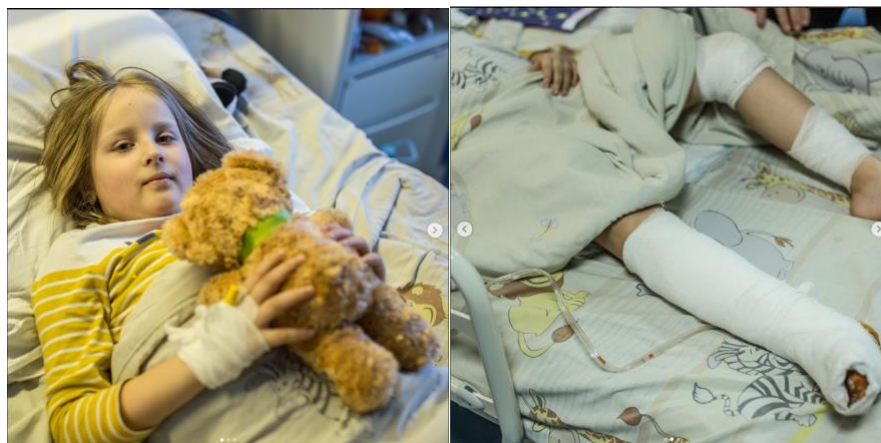
4.1.1 Children as Suffering Individuals and Collectives

The analysis finds that UNICEF’s Instagram posts tended to rely on both elements of individualization and collectivization to represent children through ‘shock effect’ appeals. In the textual aspects, there was a mix of individualization and collectivization, while the visual components predominantly featured elements emphasizing individualization.

Individualization involves representing social actors as distinct individuals, emphasizing their unique identities through textual and visual elements such as specific names, personal histories, or unique characteristics in text, and highlighting individuals in images to separate them from collective identities (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 80). In the context of this study, portraying children affected by the Ukraine crisis through individualization might involve visually showcasing a child up close, perhaps standing alone or engaged in an activity that reveals something personal about them. Textually, it could entail narrating a specific story, such as one that describes 10-year-old Maxim fleeing as conflict escalates in Kyiv, leaving behind his home and his loved ones, including his father (UNICEF, 2022, March 3). On the other hand, collectivization blends individual identities into broader collective categories, prioritizing common experiences over individual distinctions (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 80). This could be represented visually by depicting a group of children from a distance, thereby anonymizing them. In textual elements, it could

manifest as a caption that speaks to the shared experiences of children, such as one that expresses a collective desire for a different future, where children can enjoy safety, education, and comfort, contrasting with the harsh realities of conflict (UNICEF, 2022, March 9).

In ‘shock effect’ appeals, crisis-affected children individuals are typically portrayed anonymously, emphasizing their collective suffering rather than unique identities (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110). However, in the sampled data, children were occasionally individualized, primarily through visual elements. For instance, in Figure 1, Milana, a six-year-old Ukrainian girl recovering from surgery on her legs after being injured in an attack, is depicted with personalized details in both the caption and visual representation (UNICEF, 2022, March 12). The caption provides specifics about her age, name, and situation, while the photo represents her through a close shot in a hospital bed and focuses on her leg. However, there is subsequently also an element of collectivization in the broader statements about the impact of war on innocent lives and children in Ukraine within the caption. Phrases such as “how many more innocent lives will be lost?” and “How many more children wounded and traumatized?” serve to underscore the magnitude of the crisis and elicit a sense of collective concern and urgency from the audience (UNICEF, 2022, March 12).



30 684 likes
unicef Shelling killed her mother.

Without an urgent end to war in #Ukraine, how many more innocent lives will be lost? How many more children wounded or traumatized?

Six-year-old Milana is recovering from surgery on her legs at a children's hospital in Kyiv after being injured in an attack. Thanks to dedicated doctors, her wounds will heal but the death of her mother will scar her for a lifetime.

As UNICEF delivers lifesaving medical supplies to hospitals across Ukraine, children need peace, now.

Figure 1. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. March 12th, 2022. @UNICEF.

By first individualizing Milana’s story, the text strategically humanizes the impact of the conflict, departing from the traditional ‘shock effect’ approach, which tends to dehumanize crisis-affected individuals by omitting features like age, gender, and name (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110). Subsequently, the narrative shifts to a more generalized depiction, drawing the audience’s focus to the broader consequences of the conflict, suggesting that Milana’s experience represents the struggles of many other affected children. This tactic of individualizing children’s stories serves to capture the audience’s attention, which is then broadened to raise awareness of the larger issue. Additionally, the use of individualizing visual elements, such as images of Milana, is more effective in engaging the audience than depicting a mass of children. This strategic combination of individualized visuals and narrative likely aims to raise awareness, mobilize action, and foster solidarity among the audience.

4.1.2 Children as Unique yet Impersonalized

In line with the findings on individualization and collectivization, the analysis shows that UNICEF employed both personalization and impersonalization strategies to depict children affected by the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis across its Instagram posts, especially the textual content.

In MCDA, personalization serves to depict social actors as unique individuals, employing textual cues like personal pronouns and vivid descriptions, as well as visual cues such as close-up images capturing individual traits, thereby fostering relatability and human connection (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 79). Within the scope of this study, akin to elements of individualization, personalization might focus on depicting a child engaging in relatable activities like attending school or playing. In a textual context, this could manifest as a caption integrating a direct quote from the represented child, such as nine-year-old Tatiana, who says: “I’m worried about my sister who is hospitalized in Ukraine, and my brother” (UNICEF, 2022, February 28). Conversely, impersonalization involves elements such as impersonal pronouns, passive voice structures, or generic terms that depersonalize discourse by emphasizing actions or events over specific individuals (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 79). Within this study’s framework, elements of impersonalization in visual elements entail an image depicting a group of children standing in a line, their faces partially obscured to

maintain anonymity. In textual elements, impersonalization are evident in a caption discussing the crisis rather than a child’s personal viewpoint or experience, such as: “As conflict escalates in Ukraine, here’s three ways UNICEF is supporting children. More than anything, they need peace.” (UNICEF, 2022a, February 24).

The analysis of these elements in UNICEF's Instagram posts reveals a blend of impersonalization and personalization in ‘shock effect’ appeals, particularly evident in textual elements where both strategies are utilized: children are depicted collectively as a group, yet some posts also personalize children by incorporating identifiers like names and pronouns to some degree. For instance, in Figure 2, the statement “The children of Ukraine need peace, desperately, now” personalizes the discourse by addressing the affected group and recognizing their specific needs, although it lacks strong individualization (UNICEF, 2022b, February 24). Despite seeming contradictory to the typical impersonal portrayal of crisis-affected individuals in ‘shock effect’ appeals (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110), the descriptors used remain more general than specific, conveying a sense of a collective rather than individualized children. These identifiers, while not strongly distinctive, still contribute to impersonalizing and silencing children by omitting more personal details, such as their perspectives and emotions.

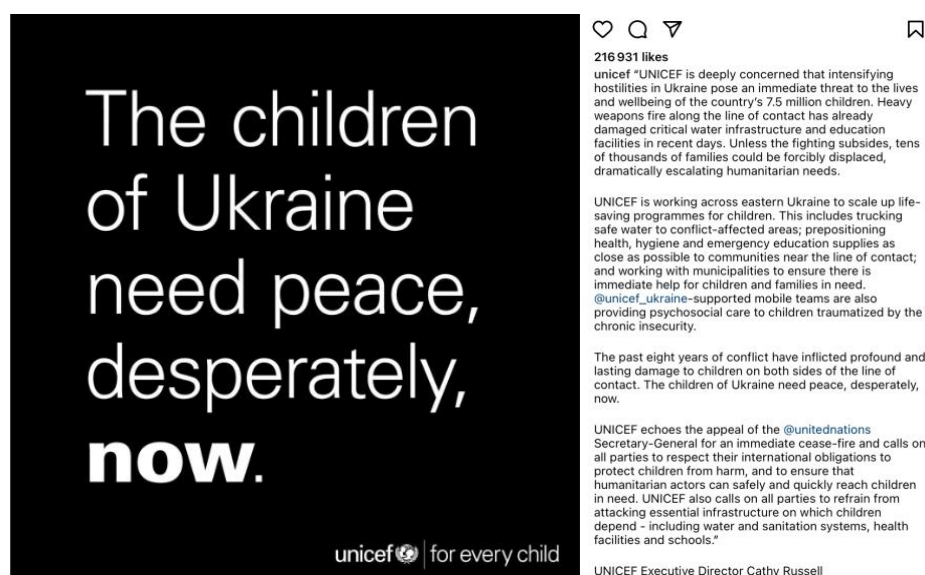


Figure 2. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. February 24th, 2022. @UNICEF.

The use of the verb ‘need’ further emphasizes impersonalization by suggesting a passive voice structure, portraying children as passive and reliant on aid. Furthermore, the caption in the same post stating “The country’s 7.5 million children (are threatened by the intensifying hostilities in Ukraine)” (UNICEF, 2022b, February 24) presents them as a collective entity rather than individuals, thereby contributing to their depersonalization. Phrases such as “Children need peace” or statistics citing “7.5 million children” were frequently reiterated throughout the Instagram posts (UNICEF, 2022b, February 24). Consequently, this approach shifts the focus onto the humanitarian crisis and its urgency rather than highlighting individual children, occasionally relegating children to a secondary position.

4.1.3 Children in Need, UNICEF in Action

In the examined data, there was a notable prevalence of functionalization elements, particularly within the textual data. UNICEF’s role as a pivotal actor in addressing the humanitarian crisis, along with the audience’s imperative to engage in humanitarian efforts and contribute donations, were frequently emphasized. On the other hand, to further underscore the audience’s perception of the necessity to engage in humanitarian endeavors, children were frequently depicted as passive social actors, dependent on humanitarian aid and devoid of agency to make decisions independently. Functionalisation refers to portraying individuals based on their function or role within the crisis, often emphasizing their need for assistance or their role as victims (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 81). Within the context of the examined data, this could be exemplified by a post featuring visual elements directly showcasing the positive outcomes of UNICEF’s humanitarian endeavors. An illustration of this can be observed in the December 22nd, 2022, post, where children are depicted in front of a UNICEF-branded bus, holding UNICEF-branded backpacks, indicating UNICEF’s provision of backpacks and education to crisis-affected children (UNICEF, 2022, December 22). This branding approach, commonly used in post-humanitarian appeals (discussed later), aims to solidify UNICEF’s portrayal as a significant player in the crisis, visibly demonstrating positive impacts on affected children. The textual components also contribute to functionalization by stating, “This holiday season, @unicef_ukraine is distributing backpacks and other educational supplies to children living through war.” (UNICEF, 2022, December 22). Hence, the post functionally portrays UNICEF as a prominent organization within the crisis, dedicated to assisting children, both visually and textually.

In this context, the role of UNICEF within the humanitarian crisis in supporting affected children and families is almost always emphasized, while children are portrayed as being passive recipients of humanitarian aid. This is for instance visible in Figure 3, where a baby (“This baby”) is depicted in the caption as “Fighting to survive” at a “UNICEF supported hospital” which highlights the challenges of providing care to newborns amidst the war (UNICEF, 2022, April 10). At the same time, the caption emphasizes UNICEF’s role in “delivering medicine, equipment, and midwifery kits” and calls for the audience to “Donate by tapping the link in our bio”. The element of objectivation manifests in the caption through the generic and dehumanized reference to “This baby”, instead of using a specific name or personal detail. The baby is not given an identity or background, reducing them to a generalized symbol of infant suffering. Because there is no mention of the baby’s personal story, family, or unique circumstances, the baby is portrayed as a representative of all children in the conflict, rather than as an individual with their own narrative. Moreover, the statement “Born into war. Fighting to survive” emphasize the baby’s vulnerable status and struggle for survival (UNICEF, 2022, April 10). While these sentences evoke sympathy, they also objectify the baby by reducing their identity to their suffering and dependency on humanitarian aid.



Figure 3. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. April 10th, 2022.

@UNICEF.

At the same time, the caption emphasizes the role and function of UNICEF within the crisis. By highlighting the “UNICEF supported hospital”, the focus shifts to the organization

and its role, rather than the personal story of the baby (UNICEF, 2022, April 10). This institutional focus thus objectifies the baby as a recipient of services provided by UNICEF as a larger entity. Additionally, the description of health workers and UNICEF's activities ("delivering medicine, equipment, and midwifery kits") frames the narrative around the functional roles of these actors. Overall, the element of objectivation in the caption manifests through the generic and dehumanized reference to "This baby", the focus on medical care and institutional support, and the emphasis on vulnerability and dependence. These elements collectively reduce the baby to a symbol of the humanitarian crisis, aiming to evoke a strong emotional response from the audience while highlighting the broader impact and efforts of UNICEF. As such, it strategically portrays UNICEF as the active agent providing solutions, which contrasts with the passive depiction of children. This reinforces a power dynamic where UNICEF is the benefactor, and the children and families are the beneficiaries. The organization's actions are framed positively, with terms such as "delivering medicine, equipment, and midwifery kits", suggesting that UNICEF's contributions are vital and impactful within the humanitarian crisis (UNICEF, 2022, April 10).

This narrative progression transitions into a call to action by stating "Donate by tapping the link in our bio" (UNICEF, 2022, April 10). This further serves to encourage audience participation in humanitarian efforts, particularly as many posts employing a shock effect strategy conclude with a call to action. Ending on this note is strategic, as the caption begins by contextualizing the situation through an emotionally resonant story of a child. It then expands to illustrate that this is not an isolated case but rather a widespread issue affecting many children through objectifying the represented child or children. Finally, the role of UNICEF is reaffirmed and emphasized, positioning the organization as a key player in providing assistance in such situations. Concluding with a call to action is effectively positioned, following the progression from emotive language to logical and rational explanation.

4.1.4 Children as Vulnerable Social Actors

In the examined data, Instagram posts employing the 'shock effect' approach consistently depicted children as vulnerable social actors, highlighting their lack of agency and emphasizing their reliance on humanitarian aid. Additionally, children were frequently portrayed, both visually and textually, in ways designed to elicit pity and indignation from the audience. This was achieved, for example, through the use of emotive language in the

captions or visuals depicting scenes of suffering and vulnerability in children. Hence, the analysis determines that UNICEF portrayed children in its ‘shock effect’ appeal-based posts through the lens of ‘ideal victims’ (Seu, 2015, p. 654). Through this representation strategy, social actors like children, deemed ‘ideal victims’, are emphasized for their ability to capture audience attention through their perceived innocence and vulnerability, necessitating adult intervention and protection (Seu, 2015, p. 654). Consequently, these appeals often utilize close-up imagery and emotive language in both text and visuals to provoke audience reactions and encourage funding.

Within the framework of this study, instances of this phenomenon are evident in posts containing visual elements portraying children in states of distress or vulnerability, exemplified by Figures 1 and 3. Moreover, textual components may incorporate language aimed at arousing sympathy and compassion among the audience, as illustrated by the November 7th July, 2022, post (UNICEF, 2022, November 7). In this instance, the narrative describes Misha, aged 9, assisting in clearing the debris of what was once a his home in Chernihiv, Ukraine. The choice of words such as ‘warm’ and ‘comfortable’, coupled with the past tense, conveys the notion of a situation now lost to “destruction by shelling” (UNICEF, 2022, November 7). This juxtaposition evokes an emotional response, prompting feelings of compassion.

In Figure 4, the focus is on 4-year-old Sofia. She is depicted with an innocent and sad expression, conveying fear and discomfort (UNICEF, 2022, February 26). This emotion is reinforced by capturing Sofia through a front angle and a close shot. A front angle, where the subject faces the viewer directly, fosters engagement and connection, suggesting transparency. A close shot tightly frames the subject, emphasizing facial expressions and details, enhancing emotional impact and intimacy. Together, these techniques provide a direct and intimate view of Sofia, emphasizing her significance, particularly as she is depicted alone in the photograph. This perspective allows viewers to discern subtle nuances in Sofia’s emotions, highlighting the profound impact of the conflict on children. By immersing viewers in her experience, the image cultivates empathy and underscores the urgent need to address the challenges faced by children affected by war. The imagery in this post, like most of the other posts analyzed, is not extremely shocking but works in tandem with emotive language to create an overall ‘shock effect’ appeal. The caption reinforces this appeal by using emotive language, such as “Fear is etched on 4-year-old Sofia’s face” and “sheltered in their home” (UNICEF, 2022, February 26). This combination enhances the impact of the imagery,

conveying the urgency of the situation and the need for UNICEF's intervention and audience support.

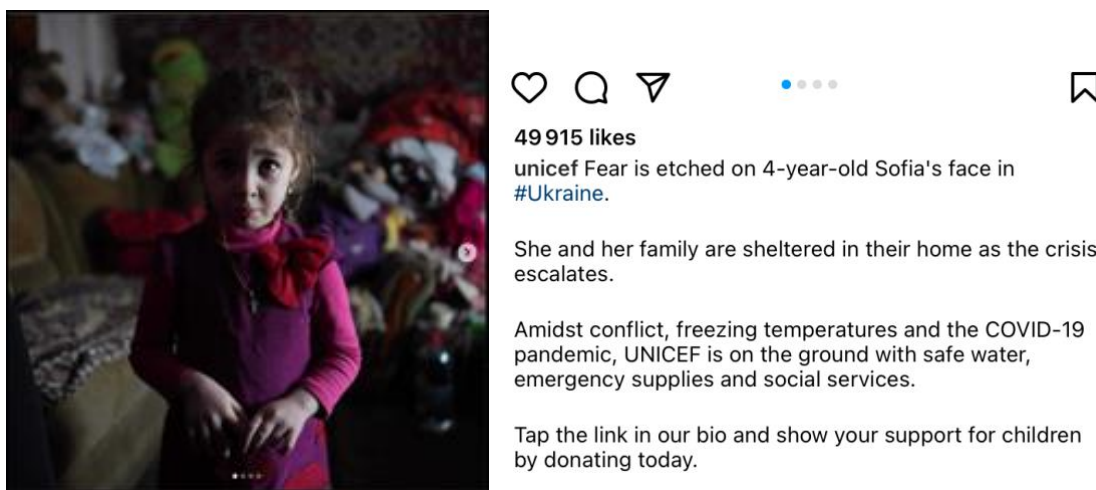


Figure 4. Screenshot of UNICEF's official Instagram account. February 26th, 2022. @UNICEF.

In summary, during the initial three months of the Ukraine conflict, UNICEF employed 'shock effect' appeals on Instagram, but these posts differed from typical representations, adding nuance to previous findings (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110). They used emotive language and imagery to depict children as vulnerable and in need of aid, portraying them as 'ideal victims' (Seu, 2015, p. 654), which is typical of traditional 'shock effect' appeals. However, the posts avoided excessive anonymization by emphasizing the children's individuality through quotes and personal information, differing from previous findings. Instead of shocking visuals, the posts used moderate imagery to evoke emotional responses, which also diverges from past findings. Despite the lack of graphic visuals, these appeals effectively generated awareness and financial support for humanitarian emergencies (Aung & Inn, 2019, p. 81). This approach likely aimed to prevent 'compassion fatigue' and audience disengagement (Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 2). The data analysis also revealed that captions transitioned from personalized stories to broader statements, blending elements of personalization/impersonalization and individualization/collectivization. This strategy attracted audience attention with personal stories before broadening the focus to the crisis itself, conveying the urgency of the situation. Consequently, UNICEF's Instagram posts consistently followed this pattern, blending 'shock effect' elements while highlighting

UNICEF's crucial role in providing relief to affected children and families in Ukraine. The use of 'shock effect' appeals during this initial period can likely be explained by their effectiveness in generating awareness and financial support, especially during humanitarian emergencies (Aung & Inn, 2019, p. 81; Scott, 2014, p. 141).

4.2 Deliberate Positive Appeals

From mid-May 2022 to August 2023, UNICEF's posts shifted to predominantly feature deliberate positive appeals. This approach became particularly prominent after the initial use of 'shock effect' appeals and persisted as the primary strategy throughout the study period. Although occasionally combined with 'shock effect' or post-humanitarian appeals, deliberate positivity remained the dominant approach in UNICEF's posts during this time. Deliberate positivist appeals in humanitarian communication often portray children with agency and dignity, emphasizing the positive impact of donors' contributions and humanizing those affected by crises (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). Unlike 'shock effect' imagery that induces guilt, deliberate positivism fosters sympathy by showing sufferers as grateful, thereby encouraging donor empathy (Boltanski, 1999, as cited in Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112).

The data analysis reveals that UNICEF's positive appeals often highlight children's agency and resilience through specific names, details, quotes, and stories, consistent with previous research (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). Visuals typically show close-up shots of children in group activities to convey authenticity and foster empathy, characteristic of deliberate positivist representations. UNICEF also emphasizes its role in humanitarian crises by showcasing initiatives for affected children and families, a typical feature of deliberate positivism. While celebrity activism occasionally appears, which diverges from typical deliberate positivist approaches, children are sometimes collectively and stereotypically depicted in relation to humanitarian themes, potentially diminishing their portrayal as individual agents of resilience. Overall, these findings align with previous research on deliberate positivist strategies, with some notable nuances. The following sections will discuss more specifically deliberate positivist strategies identified within these posts.

4.2.1 Children as Distinct Individuals with a Voice

The analysis shows that UNICEF often highlighted children affected by the Ukrainian crisis in positive appeal-based posts. This was particularly achieved through elements of personalization and individualization, which included the use of personal pronouns, names, details, quotes, and stories that underscored the children's resilience and unique traits. The frequent use of close-up images and front angles visually portrayed children individually, accentuating them by focusing on their facial expressions. These images showed children standing alone or engaging in an activity or hobby, capturing their individual characteristics and fostering relatability. This approach humanized the children affected by the crisis, making their experiences more engaging for the audience.

For instance, Figure 5 introduces Sasha, a 10-year-old who, along with her family, fled Ukraine to find refuge in Moldova (UNICEF, 2022, July 5). Sasha's voice is prominent from the outset, as the caption quotes her, providing personal insights into her experiences with war and displacement. Further details are provided about their destination, Moldova, along with a closing note highlighting UNICEF's assistance in reintegrating families into schools and communities. By centering on Sasha's perspective, the narrative humanizes her story within the broader context of the refugee crisis. Visual cues such as facial expressions, gestures, clothing, and setting play a crucial role in personalizing her experience, offering glimpses into her individuality. Sasha is depicted alone in a classroom, seated at a desk, studying a book. Her confident demeanor and smile as she turns the pages of her book not only align with her narrative but also underscore the positive impact UNICEF in supporting crisis-affected individuals



Figure 5. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. July 5th, 2022. @UNICEF.

The choice of a classroom setting, although arguably stereotypical of humanitarian themes, works within the deliberate positive approach as it reinforces the theme of education and resilience. Additionally, deliberate details, such as the vibrant color palette and the close-up shot of Sasha’s face, enhance the viewer’s connection with her journey. These elements serve to amplify her humanity, fostering empathy and relatability among audiences. Overall, through the personalized portrayal of Sasha’s story and the inclusion of resonant details, the post transcends mere documentation, inviting viewers to engage emotionally and empathetically with her narrative, and ultimately support UNICEF.

4.2.2 Children as a Collective

UNICEF not only prioritized showcasing the unique identities and voices of children but also frequently depicted them engaged in collective endeavors in its Instagram posts. The analysis highlighted how UNICEF often portrays children participating in group activities, particularly within UNICEF-affiliated kindergartens, community centers, and schools. This portrayal illustrates the concept of collectivization, wherein individual children are depicted as part of broader collective groups, emphasizing commonalities over individual differences.

Figure 6 illustrates this as the caption and accompanying visuals strongly emphasize collectivization among children, aligning with deliberate positive appeals (UNICEF, 2023, April 9). The caption may not explicitly mention collective activities however it sets a tone of positivity and community through the words “Building a bright future” by describing three little girls playing together in a kindergarten setting. The fact that they are smiling, holding

each other, and surrounded by games and colorful Lego blocks suggests a harmonious and cooperative atmosphere. These elements imply that the girls are engaged in a shared experience, fostering a sense of togetherness and camaraderie. Moreover, the visual composition reinforces the theme of collectivization. The close-up and front-angle shot focuses squarely on the three girls, highlighting their unity and shared joy.



♡ 💬 📍 ⋮ 🏷️

6 431 likes

unicef Building a bright future one brick at a time.

Children who fled the war in Ukraine are learning and playing at a UNICEF-supported parenting hub in Romania.

#ForEveryChild, play.

Figure 6. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. April 9th, 2023. @UNICEF.

By framing the scene in this manner, the photograph emphasizes the collective nature of the girls’ activities, drawing attention to their interactions and bonds with each other. The bright and colorful palette within the post further enhances the sense of positivity and vitality, evoking a cheerful and inviting mood. This choice of vibrant colors not only adds visual appeal but also conveys a message of hope and optimism, characteristic of deliberate positivism. In summary, both the textual and visual elements work together to portray children as collectivized beings, engaged in shared activities and experiences within a supportive community setting. By emphasizing the bonds between the girls and the joyful atmosphere of their play, the caption and image exemplify deliberate positive appeals, promoting a narrative of resilience, solidarity, and collective empowerment among children.

4.2.3 Empowered yet Stereotypical Representations of Children

The analysis found that Instagram posts employing deliberate positive appeals utilized both elements of genericization and specification in representing children. Genericization involves abstracting specific details to convey a generalized message or experience for wider audience appeal, while specification entails providing specific instances or details within a broader context to illustrate particular aspects or convey nuanced points (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 81). In the study's context, genericization entailed for instance representing children in conventional settings or roles, such as depicting them as a collective group in school or as refugees in typical humanitarian scenes, easily signaling the theme to the audience. Conversely, specification in this study involved portraying children from a more distinctive perspective, diverging from traditional humanitarian representations and offering unique angles and viewpoints. As discussed earlier, the posts frequently emphasized children's individuality, resilience, and agency, reflecting a focus on specification. However, they also often depicted children in stereotypical ways, suggesting genericization. Most posts portrayed children in classrooms, kindergartens, and community centers, with fewer showcasing diverse and individual activities.

For instance, in Figure 7, ten-year-old Veronika, displaced by the war in Ukraine, shares her hopeful plans for the new school year in Poland (UNICEF, 2022, September 7). In the caption, she is quoted, expressing her excitement about attending school, meeting new classmates, and making friends. The accompanying photo captures Veronika smiling as she reads a book at a table, conveying a sense of happiness and resilience. The close, angled shot personalizes her experience, emphasizing her agency and positivity despite the challenges she faces. The textual representation highlights Veronika by giving her a voice and allowing her to share her personal experience. Similarly, the visual representation features her alone, reading and smiling, casting her in a positive light. Overall, like many other children in UNICEF's sampled Instagram posts, Veronika is represented in a way that emphasizes her individuality.



Figure 7. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. September 7th, 2022.
@UNICEF.

However, while these representations specify children, they often depict them in similar, stereotypical ways, indicating genericization. Many of UNICEF’s Instagram posts feature children in classrooms, kindergartens, and community centers, with fewer posts showcasing diverse and individual activities. This aligns with previous findings that highlight existing norms in humanitarian communication, such as a visual emphasis on healthy, smiling children and schooling (Rashad et al., 2013, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 12).

4.2.4 Empowered beneficiaries of Celebrity Activism

The analysis of Instagram posts revealed an occasional use of celebrity advocacy, particularly in deliberate positive appeal-based content. While celebrity advocacy is commonly found in post-humanitarian appeals, posts featuring celebrity advocacy were almost exclusively observed in deliberate-positivist appeal-based posts within the sampled data (Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 5). Celebrity humanitarianism involves entertainment stars and philanthropic figures participating in humanitarian advertisements, likely to raise awareness about various issues across multiple platforms, including social media, news outlets, TV shows, and international summits (Kotilainen, 2020, p. 20). This can include sharing personal stories, advocating for policy change, or fundraising for humanitarian

organizations. By aligning themselves with humanitarian causes, celebrities contribute to the broader effort of promoting empathy, understanding, and action towards addressing social injustices and alleviating human suffering (Kotilainen, 2020, p. 20).

This is exemplified throughout the multiple posts within the carousel representing children with UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Priyanka Chopra Jonas (see Figure 8) (UNICEF, 2022, August 7). The caption and accompanying photo work together to construct a narrative of resilience and hope despite the “ongoing conflict” (UNICEF, 2022, August 7). The caption establishes the context of the war in Ukraine and its impact on child refugees, emphasizing the importance of UNICEF-supported education centres as safe places for learning and play. Through the use of positive language and appeals for support, the caption seeks to mobilize the audience towards UNICEF’s mission of expanding educational access for child refugees in Poland. Meanwhile, the first photo within the carousel centres on both Priyanka Chopra, smiling warmly, and a young girl, playing together. The close shot focuses attention on the facial expressions and body language of Priyanka Chopra Jonas and the young girl, allowing for a more intimate engagement with their emotions and actions. The slight angle introduces a subtle dynamic to the composition, suggesting movement or interaction between the individuals in the frame. This positioning invites the viewer to empathize with the subjects and their shared experience, reinforcing the message of solidarity and support conveyed in the caption. In summary, the post effectively employs celebrity advocacy by integrating textual and visual components to evoke sentiments of hope and empowerment (Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 5), which align with deliberate positive appeals.



unicef A safe place to learn and play.

As war in Ukraine creeps into its sixth month, our Goodwill Ambassador @priyankachopra met child refugees at a UNICEF-supported education centre in Poland.

Ongoing conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic are wreaking havoc on children's lives and futures.

Hubs like this are not only helping them learn, but are also providing a sense of safety, normality, and hope.

With your support, UNICEF is working to expand access to education for up to half a million child refugees in Poland.

Figure 8. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. August 7th, 2022. @UNICEF.

4.2.5 Children as Beneficiaries of UNICEF

Similar to the examination of ‘shock effect’ appeal-based posts in the preceding section, the analysis of deliberate positive appeals also showed a prevalence of functionalization elements, particularly in the textual data. It was clear that UNICEF’s role as a key actor within the crisis remained prominently featured, and while children were portrayed with more agency, resilience, and individuality (as demonstrated in Figures 5 and 7), they were still depicted as beneficiaries under the guardianship of UNICEF. In the study’s framework, functionalization was observed through textual elements in captions that reaffirmed UNICEF’s pivotal role in aiding children and families affected by the Ukrainian conflict. These captions often elaborated on the assistance provided, detailing delivered supplies or undertaken actions. For instance, this was evident in the caption of the December 10th, 2022, post, which emphasized UNICEF’s efforts in supporting the mental health of families amidst the conflict with the statement: “Through conflict, UNICEF is working to support the mental health of families.” (UNICEF, 2022, December 10).

The functionalization of UNICEF is further visible within Figure 9, where the caption first introduces two-year-old Yarik, who lost his home. The caption then reads, “Thanks to Spilno centres – child-friendly spaces run by UNICEF and partners – children can find much-needed peace and support” (UNICEF, 2023, February 25). The visual is a close, front shot of Yarik standing in front of what appears to be one of these UNICEF-supported centres, with the UNICEF logo clearly visible. Here, the individualization of Yarik at the beginning of the caption, followed by the depersonalization of the narrative, serves to shift the focus towards the broader consequences of conflict. This approach implies that Yarik’s experience is emblematic of the struggles faced by many other children affected by the conflict. This strategic approach not only aims to raise awareness of the plight of children impacted by the conflict but also seeks to mobilize action and solidarity among the audience, positioning UNICEF as a key actor within the crisis. Furthermore, the visible UNICEF logo in the background of the photo reinforces the idea that UNICEF is actively providing tangible solutions on the ground. This positive impact is evident as Yarik is seen smiling in the image.



Figure 9. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. February 25th, 2023.
@UNICEF.

On the other hand, although children within the deliberate positive appeal-based posts are given more emphasis and personalization through quotes or visual representation in a more empowered manner than in ‘shock effect’ appeals, they are still predominantly positioned as vulnerable beings in need of humanitarian aid. This is evident through the continued use of emotive language and the depiction of children in relation to UNICEF and other social actors, particularly in the text. In Figure 9, for instance, the phrases “violence” and “Yarik and his family lost everything”, followed by a sentence highlighting UNICEF’s support for these families, create a cause-and-effect narrative where children and families are emphasized as victims, and UNICEF is portrayed as the ‘saviour’ (UNICEF, 2023, February 25). Because Yarik and his family “lost everything, including their home,” and UNICEF, through its Spilno centres, is helping children and families to “find much-needed peace and support,” Yarik is positioned as vulnerable, while UNICEF is depicted as the rescuer (UNICEF, 2023, February 25).

In summary, UNICEF predominantly used deliberate positivist strategies in its posts, emphasizing children with names, quotes, and stories, consistent with previous findings (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). Visuals often showed children in group activities with positive expressions to foster authenticity and empathy, typical of deliberate positivist approaches (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). Moreover, UNICEF strongly highlighted its role in humanitarian

crises, focusing on initiatives for affected children and families. However, children were frequently depicted as part of a collective in school or refugee settings, quickly conveying humanitarian themes to viewers. Posts mostly featured children in classrooms, kindergartens, and community centers, with fewer showing diverse individual activities, thus balancing their portrayal against typical deliberate positivist strategies. Additionally, while not predominant, celebrity activism occasionally appeared in deliberate positive posts, which is more usual within post-humanitarian appeals. The use of deliberate positive appeals during this period can be attributed to their ability to foster a sense of authenticity, closeness, empathy, and genuineness in the audience's perception (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112).

By depicting children in personalized and resilient ways, UNICEF aims to demonstrate the impact of donations, evoke sympathy for crisis-affected children, reinforce its role as a key actor in the humanitarian crisis, and strengthen humanitarian engagement. Nonetheless, children are still often depicted as vulnerable, emphasizing the essential role UNICEF plays in supporting them. This reinforces the separation between 'us', the West, and 'them', the 'other', disempowering distant sufferers by appropriating their otherness within Western discourses of identity and agency (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 113). Consequently, although UNICEF personalized children and gave them more emphasis and voice than in its earlier 'shock effect' appeal-based posts, deliberate positivism is another form of stereotypical representation of crisis-affected individuals.

4.3 Post-Humanitarian Appeals

In addition to 'shock effect' and deliberate positivist appeals, the data analysis indicated that a portion of UNICEF's Instagram posts employed post-humanitarian appeals, though they constituted a minority compared to those using shock tactics and deliberate positivism. Posts employing post-humanitarian appeals were occasionally combined with shock tactics or deliberate positivism. This approach persisted throughout the analyzed period, with heightened prominence in the latter half of the data analysis timeframe. Post-humanitarian appeals in humanitarian communication often utilize social media features and visual techniques creatively. They typically target Western audiences, often neglecting crisis-affected individuals (Scott, 2014, p. 155). This approach prioritizes individual judgment over mere pity and emphasizes the significance of a robust brand presence for public engagement, incorporating business tactics such as marketing and branding strategies (Vestergaard, 2013, p. 2). Additionally, celebrity humanitarianism and online donation initiatives are employed to

establish brand distinctiveness, attract specific customer bases, or influence global policies (Scott, 2014, p. 155).

The data analysis shows that posts featuring post-humanitarian appeals in the sampled data utilized Instagram features like aesthetic designs and slideshow formats. These posts emphasized audience-centered textual and visual elements while promoting UNICEF's initiatives. This aligns with previous findings on typical post-humanitarian appeals (Scott, 2014, p. 155). This strategy likely served as a branding initiative for UNICEF, shifting from raising awareness and fundraising to establishing UNICEF's significant role within humanitarian crises. The following sections will detail specific post-humanitarian strategies identified in these posts.

4.3.1 Children as Subjects of Self-Centered Solidarity Appeals

The analysis also indicated that, consistent with the usual traits of post-humanitarian appeals, some of UNICEF's Instagram posts occasionally prioritize consumer interests over the immediate focus on the humanitarian crisis and its root causes. This was exemplified by textual elements in the posts that directly engage the audience rather than predominantly focusing on the children affected by the Ukraine war. Several posts utilized personal pronouns like 'you' and 'your' to evoke introspection and emotion, showcasing this tendency. In a post from February 25th, 2023 (see Figure 10), the caption directly addresses the audience with a sentence designed to prompt self-reflection, particularly targeting parents: "How does a parent find the words to comfort a child during a war? What can you say to make them feel safe, as hostilities continue unabated? What do you do to protect them?" (UNICEF, 2023, February 24). This strategy shifts the focus of the narrative onto the audience, prompting them to reflect on their own experiences in relation to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

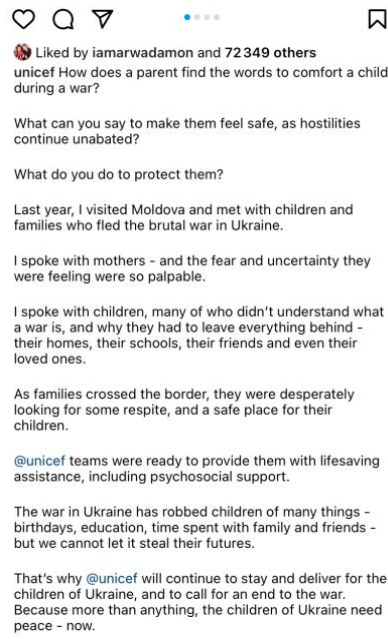


Figure 10. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. February 24th, 2023.
@UNICEF.

Similarly, UNICEF frequently prompts donations with a call to action, urging followers to “Donate by tapping the link in our bio”. This approach actively involves the audience in humanitarian efforts, strategically aligning with a narrative that initially centers on individual reflection about the war. Just as the captions personalize the experiences of children before broadening the narrative to highlight the wider consequences of conflict, this call to action seeks to draw attention to the struggles faced by numerous children affected by the conflict. Its aim is not only to raise awareness of their plight but also to mobilize action and solidarity among the audience. Concluding with a call to action is effectively positioned, following the progression from emotive language to logical and rational explanation. While UNICEF likely intended to encourage audience engagement, particularly following a phase where ‘shock effect’ appeals were predominantly used to highlight the urgency of the situation, the reliance on self-centered appeals also validates criticisms of post-humanitarian approaches. These criticisms suggest that such appeals may cultivate limited, emotion-driven, and self-focused forms of solidarity, as opposed to promoting more altruistic, political, and human-rights-oriented notions of solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 117).

4.3.2 Instagram Affordances as UNICEF's Branding Tool

The analysis further demonstrates that UNICEF's Instagram communication leverages the platform's features to effectively employ post-humanitarian appeals. UNICEF frequently utilizes the carousel format, comprising multiple slides with concise texts and graphical elements, which aligns with the format of a slideshow and resembles what is known as slideshow activism, which refers to the use of easily digestible, shareable visual content, often in the form of slideshows or carousels on social media, to raise awareness and promote social or political causes (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023, p. 3318). For instance, Figure 11 exemplifies this with a carousel-based post featuring an aesthetically appealing illustration aimed at the audience, discussing how parents can support their children during the war, including sensible ways to talk about the conflict (UNICEF, 2022, March 25). However, these posts do not address the underlying causes of the war in Ukraine. Thus, UNICEF simplifies the complexities of the war, likely to foster audience engagement, at the expense of a deeper understanding of humanitarian efforts and the perspectives of aid recipients (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 117).

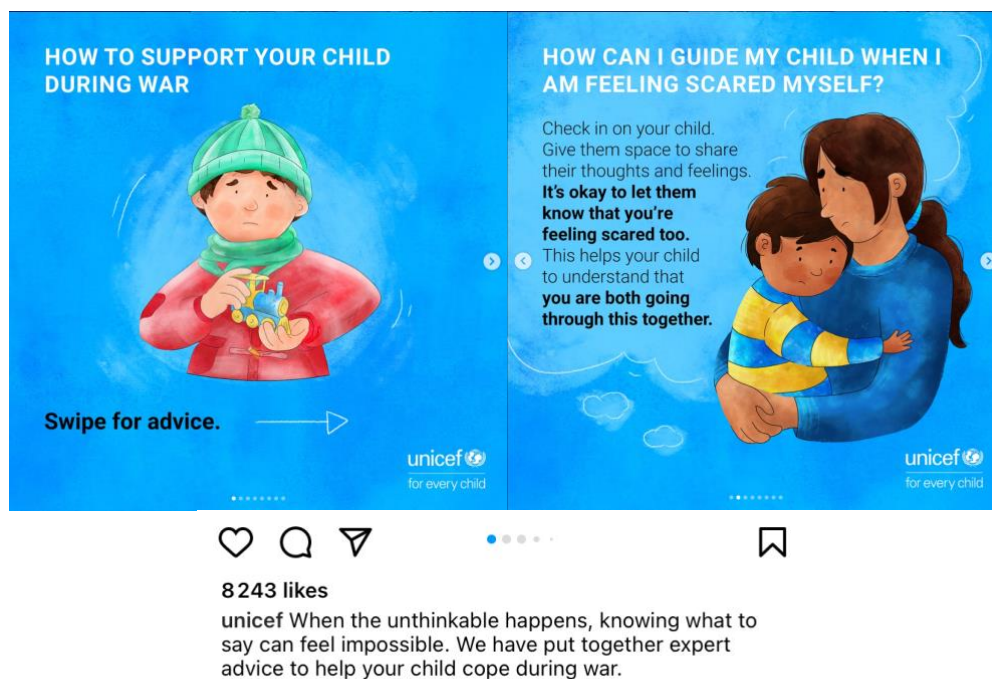


Figure 11. Screenshot of UNICEF's official Instagram account. March 25th, 2022. @UNICEF.

In this context, UNICEF's posts, including carousel-based ones, were frequently color-coordinated and visually appealing throughout most of the sampled data. This deliberate design strategy likely reflects the influence of social media logics, as our visual-centric era places increasing importance on aesthetically pleasing content (Manovich, 2019, p. 1. By prioritizing visually appealing aesthetics over more realistic and nuanced representations, UNICEF engages in consumer-oriented marketing practices, potentially reinforcing existing values rather than promoting social change (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 117). Additionally, Instagram's features, such as easy donation options (e.g., 'link in bio') further support post-humanitarian appeals.

4.3.3 Children as Subjects of UNICEF's Branding

Finally, the analysis reveals that UNICEF strategically constructs its brand, increases visibility, and showcases its partnerships through various branding tactics. UNICEF highlights governmental and organizational efforts in aiding children and families affected by the war in Ukraine. This is exemplified by statements such as in the post of February 27th, 2022: "UNICEF Moldova is on the ground, providing essential humanitarian supplies to refugees with children at the border of Moldova and Ukraine" (UNICEF, 2022, February 27). Moreover, UNICEF's imagery of the Ukrainian crisis often incorporates visual elements to underscore their humanitarian engagement (see Figure 11). Consequently, UNICEF frequently prioritizes post-humanitarian self-referential discourses rather than amplifying the voices and agency of children affected by the crisis.

As depicted in Figure 12, UNICEF utilizes carousel posts, which feature multiple photos, to showcase its support for children in Ukraine. Titled "Three ways UNICEF is supporting children in Ukraine", these posts visually outline specific actions taken by UNICEF to assist children and young people, such as providing access to health services, education, and safe water (UNICEF, 2022a, February 24). By repeatedly employing carousel posts, UNICEF effectively showcases its initiatives, offering a clear and concrete visual representation of its efforts. This emphasis on transparency and accountability is crucial within post-humanitarian appeals, as it reinforces and legitimizes the establishment of a robust brand. By demonstrating precisely and transparently what the organization does and what it stands for, UNICEF effectively engages its audience and bolsters its credibility (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 115).



Figure 12. Screenshot of UNICEF’s official Instagram account. February 24th, 2022.
@UNICEF.

To summarize, post-humanitarian appeal-based posts were the least used representation strategy by UNICEF in the sampled data, though their usage was consistent throughout the period, with a notable increase in the second half. The data analysis revealed that UNICEF strategically constructs its brand, enhances visibility, and highlights partnerships through various branding tactics, often incorporating visual elements to emphasize their humanitarian efforts in Ukraine. However, the analysis showed that UNICEF’s Instagram posts sometimes prioritize consumer interests over the urgency of the humanitarian crisis, consistent with post-humanitarian appeal criticism (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 117). Lastly, UNICEF effectively leverages Instagram’s features, frequently using slideshow activism to raise awareness and promote social or political causes. However, while UNICEF often prioritizes post-humanitarian self-referential discourses, which are likely to boost short-term fundraising, this approach also diminishes the voices and agency of children affected by the crisis, thereby straying from the original humanitarian discourse.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to answer: How has UNICEF represented children in the Ukrainian crisis in its 2022 Instagram posts? To address this, a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) was conducted on 150 Instagram posts by UNICEF from February 24th, 2022, to August 16th, 2023, focusing on children and families affected by the Ukraine war. The analysis aimed to identify the humanitarian representation strategies used in these posts by examining both textual and visual elements – captions and photographs – to capture explicit and implicit meanings. Consequently, the analysis utilized lexical and visual strategies from MCDA (Machin and Mayr, 2012, pp. 79-103) and it identified three main humanitarian representation strategies: ‘shock effect’, deliberate positivism, and post-humanitarian. The findings revealed that UNICEF predominantly relied on deliberate positivism, utilized ‘shock effect’ substantially but to a lesser extent, and employed post-humanitarian appeals the least. ‘Shock effect’ appeals were predominantly used in the first phase of the crisis, for a period of approximately three months, while deliberate positivism was mostly employed after this period and until the end of the data analysis. Lastly, post-humanitarian appeals were sporadically employed throughout the research period.

However, the data analysis shows that while UNICEF employed these humanitarian representation strategies to depict children on Instagram, it also sometimes integrated several elements of ‘shock’ appeal, deliberate positivism, and post-humanitarian themes within its posts, especially its captions. Instead of strictly adhering to a singular discursive strategy, the Instagram posts often featured a blend of discursive tools which are initially specific to a single humanitarian representation strategy. For instance, it utilized both personalized individual profiles and broader collective representations, as well as a mix of specific stereotypical portrayals and more generalized depictions. This approach was particularly effective in focusing the audience’s attention on individual children’s stories, while also using discursive elements to broaden awareness of the broader conflicts affecting many other children. By personalizing these stories, UNICEF captured the audience’s attention and then expanded their understanding to highlight the larger issue at hand.

Deliberate positive appeals were the most utilized representation strategy in the sampled Instagram posts, particularly from May 2022 until the end of the research period. Within this study, UNICEF frequently emphasized children’s individuality through personalizing textual elements with specific names, details, quotes, and stories. However, it often depicted children in group activities centered around schooling and play, reducing their individuality and

reinforcing stereotypical humanitarian representations. Celebrity activism, though usually more associated with post-humanitarian appeals (Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 5), was used on several occasions within these posts, enhancing their impact by emphasizing the positive outcomes of donors' engagement and UNICEF's actions for the involved children. In addition, UNICEF heavily emphasized its role in the humanitarian crisis, highlighting its support initiatives.

The prevalence of deliberate positive appeals aligns with previous research, which shows that humanitarian communication trends often depict children positively (Rashad et al., 2013, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 12). These findings also support the shift towards recognizing children as both innocent and purposeful actors, empowering them by giving them a voice in accompanying text (Fass, 2011, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 11). However, they also reflect criticisms that humanitarian organizations frequently depict children in contexts of schooling and recreation (Clark-Kazak, 2009, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 11; Rashad et al., 2013, as cited in Vasavada, 2016, p. 12), reinforcing stereotypical representations. The strong use of deliberate positive appeals during this period can be attributed to their ability to foster a sense of authenticity, closeness, empathy, and genuineness in the audience's perception (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 112). This strategy is particularly valuable for UNICEF to strengthen audience engagement and support, especially following the predominance of 'shock effect' appeal-based posts in the first phase of the study.

'Shock effect' appeals ranked as the second most used representation strategy, particularly after the start of the Ukraine war in late February 2022, lasting until around mid-May 2022. In this period, children were depicted as vulnerable through emotive language in captions and imagery showing them being scared, injured, or cold, evoking empathy and pity from the audience. Moreover, there was a consistent portrayal of children as passive participants within the crisis, devoid of agency in determining their own destiny and reliant on humanitarian assistance. In a parallel vein to the observations concerning deliberate positivist appeals, UNICEF prominently underscored its involvement in addressing the humanitarian crisis, particularly accentuating its supportive efforts in the accompanying captions. Overall, children were represented as 'ideal victims,' conforming to stereotypical 'shock effect' portrayals of crisis-affected individuals. This perpetuates the victimization of children, neglecting the complexities of aid work and promoting an 'us' versus 'them' narrative, which emphasizes the dependency of aid recipients and highlights perceived disparities (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 113).

While these aspects align with previous research on ‘shock effect’ appeals, there are deviations from prior findings. Notably, children were often depicted using a slightly altered ‘shock effect’ strategy. In the examined data, children were occasionally personalized, likely to initially engage attention before broadening the discourse to raise awareness of the humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, unlike conventional ‘shock effect’ methods reliant on unsettling imagery (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 110), UNICEF’s Instagram visuals tended towards more moderate representations. This suggests a departure from the traditional approach, possibly to mitigate ‘compassion fatigue’ (Seu, 2015, p. 665; Lugo-Ocando & Hernández-Toro, 2015, p. 2). Moreover, this shift may be ascribed to the adoption of codes of conduct following critiques of aid agencies employing shocking imagery, aiming to avoid pathos-inducing visuals perpetuating biases and reinforcing a Northern-centric perspective. The initial use of shock effect may have been aimed at enhancing audience awareness and support following the beginning of the humanitarian crisis, as such appeals are often effective in garnering attention and financial assistance (Scott, 2014, p. 141). Hence, UNICEF’s Instagram posts in this period might face criticism for providing only limited insights into the broader impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on children and families.

During the study period, a subset of posts integrated post-humanitarian appeals, sometimes merging them with shock tactics or deliberate positivism. This approach persisted consistently throughout the analyzed timeframe, gaining increased prominence in the latter half of the data analysis. Utilizing the functionalities of Instagram, UNICEF emphasized visually captivating content, including illustrations, carousel formats, and more detailed visual posts incorporating textual elements. Moreover, UNICEF’s Instagram content showcased carousel format posts akin to slideshow activism (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers, 2023, p. 3318) which prioritized audience-centered discussions. Across these posts, UNICEF actively reinforced its brand by highlighting its pivotal role in addressing the Ukraine crisis, as well as its ongoing commitment to humanitarian endeavors and transparency. This was notably achieved through visuals showcasing its on-the-ground assistance efforts, but also textual elements reasserting its dedication to helping children and families in need.

The discoveries concerning post-humanitarian appeals in UNICEF’s Instagram posts are consistent with earlier research (Hoijer, 2004, p. 514). This approach probably functioned as a branding tactic for UNICEF, transitioning from the initial objective of raising awareness and soliciting donations for the humanitarian crisis to affirming its pivotal role within the crisis. This strategy was consistently employed throughout the entire study period, unlike the

‘shock effect’ strategy and deliberate positivist appeals, which were used selectively. However, and similar to ‘shock effect’ strategy, this strategy may prioritize short-term fundraising over acknowledging the voices and agency of crisis-affected children, diverging from humanitarian principles through focusing on self-referential narratives (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 117). Hence, the utilization, albeit limited, of post-humanitarian appeals suggests changes in communication strategies mirroring broader developments in technology, politics, and society (Ongenaert, 2019, p. 196). This includes the imperative for humanitarian organizations to differentiate themselves and cultivate a donor and supporter base to sustain their operations, given their dependence on voluntary contributions.

In summary, data analysis unveiled that UNICEF utilized three different humanitarian strategies to depict children impacted by the Ukraine war, each during various timeframes. Expanding on existing literature, this analysis underscores UNICEF’s continued reliance on humanitarian communication strategies such as ‘shock effect’ and deliberate positivist appeals (Vasavada, 2016, p. 1). However, the effectiveness of this approach remains open to debate and potential improvement, considering the significant criticisms directed towards both representation strategies for their tendency to perpetuate the perception of aid recipients as lacking agency and dependent on Western donors (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 111; de Jong, 2018, p. 15; Ongenaert & Soler, 2024, p. 4). This suggests that, despite the potential for social media to offer more nuanced and contextualized representations of humanitarian issues, UNICEF may prioritize broader outreach, potentially at the expense of comprehensive contextualization for its audience (Tavernor, 2019, p. 230).

Despite children affected by the Ukraine crisis being predominantly depicted as vulnerable and in need of humanitarian aid, which often perpetuates the us/them dichotomy and the ‘white saviour complex’ (Cooney-Petro, 2019, p. 4), the unique context of this crisis within the Global North offers an interesting perspective. Unlike recent humanitarian crises that largely focus on the Global South, the Ukrainian crisis involves Western individuals, prompting questions about the applicability of the ‘white saviour complex’ in this context. This study reveals that while children affected by the Ukrainian crisis are generally shown as vulnerable and needing aid, they are also more frequently humanized, even in ‘shock effect’ appeal posts, through personal information and individualized visual elements. Although this research is not comparative with a crisis situated in the Global South, its findings contribute to the broader academic discourse by providing new insights into the humanitarian representations of children affected by the Ukrainian crisis. These insights align with

previous findings regarding news representations pointing out that the portrayal of Ukrainian conflict victims, primarily European, white, and Christian, is more positive compared to those from non-Western regions like Syria, where victims are typically non-European and non-Christian (el-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024, p. 1).

Consequently, this study has significant academic and practical implications. It bridges existing gaps in humanitarian communication research by illuminating how crisis-affected individuals, particularly children, are portrayed in humanitarian contexts, especially on social media. Additionally, by focusing on a recent humanitarian crisis situated in the Global North, the study offers novel insights into current representation practices. It addresses an empirical gap by examining how organizations use representation strategies to achieve their goals, thereby bridging the gap between humanitarianism and communication. This study enhances our understanding of humanitarian communication and emphasizes the need for global humanitarian organizations to reconsider their representation strategies, which have been influenced by Western ideology and superiority. Given the context of this crisis, there is an opportunity to innovate and develop more ethical approaches, such as policy recommendations for representing crisis-affected individuals. Such approaches should offer deeper insights into the crisis context and promote long-term audience engagement, while avoiding the objectification of individuals as merely vulnerable. However, as Cohen (2001, p. 180) argued, if individuals are depicted as not seeking assistance, why should aid be extended to them? This question persists. Nonetheless, compared to earlier humanitarian communication strategies that employed shocking imagery, there is a noticeable improvement as children are now given greater emphasis and a voice.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the identification of children within the Instagram posts was based on the researcher's perspective, which could have led to errors in selecting individuals who might be over 18. However, most children in the posts were provided with an age, and given UNICEF's focus on children, there was likely minimal ambiguity in the selection process. The study could have been more precise by focusing on specific subcategories within the category of children (e.g., toddlers, teenagers), as representation may vary across these groups. Future research could focus on one specific category or compare multiple categories to identify potential variations, such as between infants and teenagers. Additionally, although this study focused solely on Instagram posts, future research should include video-based content, such as reels, which are also commonly used by UNICEF on its Instagram page. Analyzing such content could yield different results.

Furthermore, examining other platforms used by UNICEF, such as its blog/website, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how children affected by the Ukrainian crisis are represented and whether there are variations across platforms. To broaden the research scope, future studies could also compare the representation of crisis-affected children in the Global North to those in crises in the Global South.

6 Referenced Instagram Posts

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, December 10). *A book. A smile. A toy. Children who've fled the war in Ukraine play at a UNICEF-supported centre.* [Photograph]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/Cl-0xKtK4K1/?img_index=1

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, December 22). *All aboard the gift-giving train! 🚂📖🎁*
This holiday season, @unicef_ukraine is distributing backpacks and other educational supplies to. [Photograph]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CmdSzzKoNwN/?img_index=2

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022a, February 24). *As conflict escalates in #Ukraine, here's three ways UNICEF is supporting children. More than anything, they need peace. Help us.* [Photograph]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CaYEO2YIgkQ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022b, February 24). *“UNICEF is deeply concerned that intensifying hostilities in Ukraine pose an immediate threat to the lives and wellbeing of the.* [Photograph]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CaXGkZmOMx0/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, February 26). *Fear is etched on 4-year-old Sofia's face in #Ukraine. She and her family are sheltered in their home.* [Photograph]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CacrnjBrI5t/?img_index=1

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, February 27). *As needs of millions of children in #Ukraine mounts, @UNICEFMoldova is on the ground, providing essential humanitarian supplies to refugees.* [Photograph]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CafgVQXFfz/?img_index=3

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, February 28). *"I'm worried about my sister who is hospitalized in Ukraine, and my brother," says nine-year-old Tatiana at a.* [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CahkcelKjdJ/>

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, March 3). *"I will remember this day for the rest of my life." As conflict intensified in Kyiv, Natalia and 10-year.* [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CaoRtRlNnlG/>

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, March 9). *This is not the future we wanted for our children. We wanted them to watch for clear skies, not shells.* [Photograph]. Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca4JSfFgaRL/>

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, March 12). *Shelling killed her mother. Without an urgent end to war in #Ukraine, how many more innocent lives will be lost?* [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca_3xdYIDDl/?img_index=1

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, March 25). *When the unthinkable happens, knowing what to say can feel impossible. We have put together expert advice to help your.* [Photograph].

Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CbiT29rABpt/?img_index=3

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2023, April 9). *Building a bright future one brick at a time. Children who fled the war in Ukraine are learning and playing.* [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CqztLtbO5b3/?img_index=2

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, April 10). *Born into war. Fighting to survive. This baby is receiving intensive care at a UNICEF supported hospital in Lviv, #Ukraine.*

[Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CcKB0u0NQhM/?img_index=4

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, July 5). *“I miss school so much because that’s where my friends were. But most of all, I miss home and my.* [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cfn4TdUBMVY/?img_index=5

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, August 7). *A safe place to learn and play. As war in Ukraine creeps into its sixth month, our Goodwill Ambassador @priyankachopra.*

[Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cg-P1RIsQmk/?img_index=1

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, September 7). *“My plans for September are to go to school, meet new classmates and make new friends,” says ten-year-old.* [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CiMPsO_rpLD/?img_index=2

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2022, November 7). *Misha, 9, is helping clear the rubble from what was once a warm and comfortable home in Chernihiv, Ukraine.* [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CkrPyIqMme8/?img_index=3

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2023, February 24). *How does a parent find the words to comfort a child during a war? What can you say to make.* [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CpDUNwNuxFq/?img_index=1

UNICEF [@Unicef]. (2023, February 25). *When violence in Ukraine escalated a year ago, 2-year-old Yarik and his family lost everything, including their home.* [Photograph].

Instagram.

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