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YouTube as a narrative battlefield: Brazilian social media influencers and the Russian war in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

In digital media spaces, many non-traditional actors, such as social media influencers, challenge traditional knowledge elites and gatekeepers, journalists, and experts by disseminating information and offering explanations to political events. Especially young people are increasingly following politics, news, and societal issues through social media influencers, and they may adopt values and ideologies from them. Following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, several popular Brazilian YouTube influencers produced lengthy informative videos with the aim of explaining the historical background of the war to their followers. This article studies four ideologically different influencers using a discourse analytical approach and drawing from international relations' conceptualization of strategic narratives, i.e. narratives produced by state actors to legitimize their policies. The article focuses on how these influencers participated in the narrative battle between Ukraine and the so-called West and Russia by drawing from various information sources and historical trajectories. By doing so, they legitimated some interpretations and, thus, functioned as "political-educational influencers." This article contributes to a nascent field of social media influencers' politicization, especially in the so-called Global South, and to strategic narrative scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Brazil; social media influencer; strategic narrative; war; YouTube

Introduction

War is not fought only on the physical battlefield, but it expands to discursive struggles and in the digital sphere (Asmolov, 2021), expanding the conflict beyond its geographic borders as competing parties aim to win over and convince with their narratives, not only their own citizens, but also global audiences. In the Russian war in Ukraine, while Russian strategic narratives frame the war as being caused by the Collective West, especially the United States and its allies and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), that are attacking Russia, Ukrainian narratives position Ukraine as a resilient

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country fighting for its existence against the existential threat and aggression posed by Russia, or the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire before that (Kaneva, 2023). Strategic narratives are “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 2).

While Western countries condemned the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022, conveying the Ukrainian narrative almost unanimously, in the so-called Global South countries, the conflict has been framed in the media and political discussions from more diverse perspectives (Dharmaputra, 2023). For example, Brazil – one of the biggest countries in the world and traditionally impartial in its foreign policy (Pelevina, *in press*) – did not condemn the invasion, and media coverage in the country offered multiple perspectives (Belém et al., 2024; Guazina et al., 2023).

In hybrid media spaces, many non-traditional actors participate in disseminating information and misinformation as well as offering explanations to political events, challenging the traditional knowledge elites and societal gatekeepers, such as political commentators, journalists, and scholars. During conflicts, non-traditional actors participate in framing the conflict by spreading information, amplifying propaganda, and gathering funding for humanitarian and military equipment (Pelevina et al., 2024). This may have an impact on how the national or global public perceives conflict. Among these non-traditional actors are social media influencers who reach tens of millions of followers on various social media platforms. The term “social media influencer” refers to people who produce content for social media platforms and exert influence over their followers (Borchers, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011).

In addition to war correspondents and so-called military bloggers (Bennett, 2013), who address exclusively war-related topics, some social media influencers previously focusing on lifestyle issues have become “war influencers” during the Russian war in Ukraine (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2023). In Brazil, instantly following the invasion, many commercial lifestyle influencers expressed their shock, and some more *educationally oriented* influencers produced lengthy *informative* videos to explain the events and the historical background of the conflict to their followers. In addition to professional historians and teachers, educative YouTube content is produced in Brazil by various types of influencers, such as originally lifestyle content producers who have started to address social, political and meaningful issues, thus “going political” (M. Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022) or becoming “journalistic YouTubers” (Hurcombe, 2024). Especially during crises or other societal turmoil, followers of a popular content producer may expect their favorite influencer to comment on the topic or even urge them to choose a side.

Research on the politicization of lifestyle social media influencers or influencer politics has so far mainly focused on the Global North

(Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2023) and the Asia-Pacific region (Abidin et al., 2021), to some extent neglecting many of the so-called Global South countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South America. In the Brazilian politically polarized context, young people follow societal issues increasingly through social media influencers (Solano & Rocha, 2022) and may adopt values, ideologies, and perspectives from them. Major Brazilian social media influencers, despite mobilizing seven-figure numbers of followers, are often unknown to international audiences since the research on the topic is published almost exclusively in Portuguese, and their activities remain less known to the anglophone audiences/world (For studies on Brazilian influencers “going political,” see da Cruz & Andrelo, 2023; V. França & Leurquin, 2022; V. R. V. França & Lima, 2020).

Against this backdrop, we study *what geopolitical discourses emerge in Brazilian social media influencers’ YouTube videos as part of the narrative battle between Ukraine and the so-called West, and Russia in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, and how these discourses connect to Brazilian national identity*. In doing this, we draw from the international relations’ conceptualization of strategic narratives, narratives produced and used by state actors to legitimate their policies (Colley, 2020; Miskimmon et al., 2014) and consider influencers to be “narrative entrepreneurs” in the matrix of international politics who participate in debating interpretations of current events. The study contributes to the emerging scholarship on the politicization of social media influencers or influencer politics (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2023), also expanding to the field of education (Marandino, 2017).

YouTube is one of the most popular platforms in Brazil, and popular Brazilian YouTube content creators may have over 40 million followers. Some of these influencers combine entertaining and informative/educational content, which has been studied from the point of view of influencers contributing to scientific communication as well as challenging professional historians and historical knowledge (Brito & Rodrigues Júnior, 2023; Rodrigues Junior, 2022; Silveira Bauer & de Amaral Maia, 2023). Socio-economic inequality is a persistent feature of post-colonial Brazil. During the past few decades, political polarization between the left and right has increased, and the role of social media platforms, especially YouTube, as a tool for political mobilization and information and identity construction has become central (Monteiro, 2022; Santini et al., 2023). For instance, some popular political influencers have gained fame on YouTube before entering politics, and alternative perspectives on societal discussion are shared on the platform.

This article is structured so that first, we explain the concept of strategic narrative, then move on to address social media influencers as political and

educational actors, especially on Brazilian YouTube. Next, we outline the data and focus on four popular educational influencers, one video from each of them, and the discourse analytic approach. Finally, we present and discuss the results before concluding the study.

Strategic war narratives in the Russian war in Ukraine

The concept of strategic narrative, derived from Joseph Nye's (2008) famous concept of soft power, has been used by numerous scholars in the field of international relations, to highlight the power of narratives and to explain how states aim to shape public perceptions in their favor, to legitimate their actions (Colley, 2020; Miskimmon et al., 2014). While often used interchangeably, strategic narratives differ from similar concepts, such as discourse, as narratives are intentionally formed using existing discourses as raw material (Colley, 2017; Miskimmon et al., 2014, 2017).

The power of strategic narratives lies in their ability to appeal to shared perceptions and values, recognizable stereotypes and discourses that resonate with the target audience (O'Loughlin et al., 2017, p. 37). Strategic narratives are a communicative tool that offers a coherent construction of a nation's identity, shared past, desired future, and the actions needed to get there (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 5). Strategic narratives are strategic in the sense that political elites have intentionally put them together to serve their own political needs. Of three types of narratives – system narratives (referring to a desired international system), identity narratives (state identity), and issue narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017) – this article focuses especially on the state identity narratives and issue narratives about the war. The temporal dimension is essential; the target audience is guided from the shared past toward the desired future. Strategic narratives include a plot, actors, space, and time, and are constructed as a sequence of events. Emplotment and selection of facts to create a unified story also means obfuscating other facts (Colley, 2017). To be effective, strategic narratives must appeal to “enduring identity narratives” (Krebs, 2015), international master narratives, or be compatible with local political myths (Schmitt, 2018).

Russia invaded parts of Ukraine in 2014, but the conflict escalated into a full-scale war in February 2022. Russian and Ukrainian competing interpretations of history-driven strategic narratives (see Table 1) date back prior to 2022. For Russia, the crucial moment and cornerstone of national identity is the victory in the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War (Malinova, 2017). Russian strategic narratives have depicted Ukrainian as a brother nation, currently being captivated by Nazis (Ukrainian leaders and “Kiev's Nazi Junta”), and Russia, the leader of the Slavic nations, a big brother, must save the suffering brothers (Khaldarova, 2021; Pelevina, 2025).

Table 1. Russian and Ukrainian strategic war narratives. Based on previous studies (Khaldarova, 2021; Pynnöniemi, 2016; Szostek, 2017) and studies conducted during the current invasion (Pasti, 2024; Pelevina, (2025).

Narrative description E.g., who is guilty, who is the victim, and what is a desired outcome and/or solution)	Representations of NATO, The US, The West	Representation of Russia	Representation of Ukraine, Ukrainians	Information sources, vocabulary, central history-political themes
Russian/Kremlin official narratives				
NATO, US, and the “collective West” are responsible, Russia is the victim and Crimea and Donbass belong to Russia, Ukraine is de-Nazified, Ukraine ceases to exist or becomes part of Russia’s sphere of influence	NATO as an expansionist threatening Russia, The US and its European allies, the Collective West are warmongering and responsible for the war	Humanitarian peaceful, victim/forced to defend itself from external threat Russia recognized as a superpower Ordinary Russian people as apolitical	Kiev Nazi junta and fascists vs. suffering civilian victims (in Donbass) From Slavic little brothers to enemies and even not being a real nation	Russian sources; propagandistic concepts such as Special military operation, Kiev’s junta, Russian genocide, Russophobia, Great patriotic war
Ukrainian official narratives				
Russia alone is guilty, Ukraine is defending itself and protecting Western values (freedom against authoritarianism), Western countries must arm Ukraine, Authoritarian Russia vs. Democratic Ukraine	Allies who must help Ukraine, moral obligation to support Ukraine	Sole aggressor, terrorist state, Colonialist, imperialist Ordinary Russians must protest against their leaders, if not, equally responsible	Victim, Sovereign state, a nation, European, <i>Western?</i> Ukraine, a country with rich history, existed before Russia and suffered from Russian/Soviet imperialism	Ukrainian official sources, soldiers, citizens and Western academic, think tanks Unprovoked full-scale invasion Holodomor

During the current full-scale invasion, Ukraine has launched an effective nation branding campaign, highlighting the country’s bravery and *Westernness* (Kaneva, 2023). Ukrainian strategic narratives emphasize Ukrainian culture, language, and suffering from Russian/Soviet imperialism (Klymenko, 2022). Central to Ukrainian strategic narratives and collective identity is the man-made famine suffered in the 1930s, commonly known as Holodomor. Holodomor has become part of Ukraine’s collective memory, especially after the Orange Revolution that took place in 2004–2005 (Kiryukhin, 2015). Ukrainian narratives target simultaneously Western and local audiences; thus, as Fomenko (2023) argues, Ukrainian national identity is different from national image projection. Perception of the cultural icons varies among audiences; for instance, while President Zelensky is central to the image of Ukraine in Western countries, he does not enjoy a similar status among Ukrainians (Fomenko, 2023).

In many Western countries, the United States and Europe, the Russian invasion was instantly condemned. The President of the United States, Joe Biden, called the war an “unprovoked” invasion of an independent sovereign state and thanked Ukrainians for their bravery in his speech following the

invasion (Herb et al., 2022). Throughout the war, Western countries have been represented as guardians of democracy and justice, as morally superior actors who support Ukraine in the war effort against Russia. This was framed as democracy against authoritarianism (Kaneva, 2023), and Western countries supported the rule-based liberal international order.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Brazil was heading toward presidential elections held in October of the same year, and the campaigning had already started. Neither of the two incumbents, President Jair Bolsonaro nor his most prominent opponent, former President and Worker Party's candidate Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), condemned the invasion but instead called for diplomatic solutions and peace negotiations. Lula was later accused of "parroting Putin's propaganda," while indeed, the presidents' positioning echoed Brazil's long-term international positioning: impartiality (nonalignment), peacefulness, and pragmatism (Belém et al., 2024). National identity in Brazil has been described as "almost Northern" (by former president Henrique Cardoso), consisting of several layers and Western/Northern and post-colonial elements. During the Cold War, despite being a "developing" or "Third World" nation, Brazil did not belong to the Nonaligned movement (Belém et al., 2024). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emerging multipolar world order, Brazil has enthusiastically taken up the role as a representative of the Global South (Pecequilo, 2021), as the term replaced the previously used term "Third World." The leading role has been visible also in BRICS – an intergovernmental organization of ten emerging economies – where Brazil is one of the founding members. Brazil also played a key role in shaping the BRICS (later BRICS+) into a geopolitical bloc and positioning it as an emerging counterbalance to the West.

Strategic narratives are increasingly subject to constant challenge and negotiation in digital spaces. On social media, contesting narratives are amplified by overtly and covertly state-affiliated actors, as well as by non-state actors, NGOs, civil societies, private companies, and individuals such as social media influencers who participate in the narrative battle and may have an impact on their followers' understanding of politics (Harff & Schmuck, 2024) also in the international scene. As influencers do not represent any official institutions, they may mix various discourses and reflect different aspects of national identity.

Social media influencers and knowledge production

During the past decade, many lifestyle influencers have started to address political and social issues, especially topics that are relevant to their young followers, such as environmental issues, social responsibility, gender equality, and minority rights (M. Riedl et al., 2021; Solano & Rocha, 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022). Social media influencers have a committed audience and the

ability to combine informative and persuasive rhetoric. This makes influencers interesting partners for various actors targeting the influencers' follower base. Due to their political awakening, influencers have been mobilized, for example, for spreading the government's health communication during covid-19 pandemic (Pöyry et al., 2022), political campaigning (Goodwin et al., 2023), and even state propaganda (Wirtschafter, 2022). During the Russian war in Ukraine, for instance, Ukrainian influencers have reported war events to their followers and helped to gather funds for the war efforts, but they have also functioned as inspirational patriotic influencers, or "strategic narrators" (Pelevina et al., 2024).

In the attention economy, influencers operate on commercial social media platforms, where societal discussion is curated by algorithms. Influencers aim to build reliability and credibility, working within the limits set by the platform, harnessing the features and affordances of the platforms, "pleasing the algorithm" (Cotter, 2019).

As commercial influencers start addressing "serious" issues and producing informational and educational social media content, becoming "journalistic" (Hurcombe, 2024) or adopting an "educational focus" (Fang et al., 2024), they also challenge traditional knowledge authorities. For example, doctors and pharmaceutical influencers are challenged by patient influencers and alternative health influencers (Baker, 2022), and historians by amateur "history enthusiasts" (Silveira Bauer & de Amaral Maia, 2023). The emergence of non-formal education influencers has blurred the lines between formal and informal education (Chen et al., 2025).

In Brazil, many early content creators and today's most popular influencers produce educational or informative content on YouTube. Popular topics include natural sciences, health sciences, environmental issues, and history; many are politicized (Rodrigues Junior, 2022). These influencers combine entertainment, knowledge (*conhecimento*), and information (Silveira Bauer & de Amaral Maia, 2023). When Russia attacked Ukraine, several popular Brazilian educational influencers produced lengthy informative videos about the background of the conflict for their followers, thus participating in conveying, promoting, or contesting the official Brazilian stance, and negotiating national collective identity.

Post-colonial Brazil remains a highly unequal society, and colonial history continues to impact the social structure. School history teaching has long suffered from Eurocentrism (Guimarães, 2015). Despite active social movement, democratization since the 1980s, and programs during Lula's first two terms (2003–2010) (Guimarães, 2015), universal access to *quality* education has not been reached (Guilherme et al., 2024). This may partly explain the demand for public informal educational outlets. Historical-political and national identity contestations manifest in the field of education. In post-colonial and post-dictatorship Brazil, educational contestations revolve

Table 2. Selected Brazilian YouTube influencers.

Influencer	Description	Political position	Platform(s) and channel metrics (June 2023)
Felipe Castanhari	One of Brazil's more famous and popular YouTube content creators, lifestyle influencer who started producing informational educational content, has also produced educational Netflix series <i>Mundo Misterio</i> . Entertaining/educational influencer	Not aligned, opposed Bolsonaro	<i>YouTube: Canal Nostalgia 14.7 million subscribers</i>
Heni Ozi Cukier, Professor (HOC)	Political scientist, geopolitics teacher, local politician (state legislator in São Paulo 2018–2022), candidate in 2022 elections for Senate, and educational content creator on YouTube. Teacher/educational influencer	Liberal right	<i>YouTube: 775,000 subscribers, Instagram: 468,000 followers.</i>
Rita von Hunty	A persona created and performed by Guilherme Terreri Lima Pereira, a teacher, public speaker, drag artist, and educational content creator	Far left (left of Lula) Post-colonial, anti-racism, socialist	<i>YouTube: Tempero Drag: 1.13 million subscribers Instagram: 1 million followers</i>
Gabriela Prioli	A commercial Instagram influencer and in spring 2022 CNN Brazil's political reporter/presenter, informative journalistic YouTube channel	Opposed Bolsonaro but had not stated her political position	<i>Instagram: 2.3 million followers YouTube: 921,000 subscribers</i>

around colonialism and racial inequality, especially among the Left, as well as the legacy of military dictatorship (1963–1984), memorized with pride and nostalgia by the far-right (Patto Sá Motta, 2023).

Data and methods

In order to analyze geopolitical discourses that emerge in the context of Russia-Ukraine war, we chose to focus on YouTube influencers who all produce informative, educational videos, and represent different ideologies and a variety of styles of content production. All of them also had to be popular content producers, having from 500,000 to 8 million views (in

Table 3. Videos analyzed.

Influencer	Video name and description	Length	Publication date	Views (in March 2025)
Felipe Castanhari	Entenda a Guerra entre RÚSSIA e UCRÂNIA – Doc Nostalgia. (Understand the War between Russia and Ukraine) https://youtu.be/LmShtQMtcil	1:00:00	3.4.2022	8 411 404
Heni Ozi Cukier	Video: invasão Russa de grande Escala na Ucrânia (entenda tudo). (Russian large-scale invasion in Ukraine (understand everything)) A YouTube live with IR-scholar Olivier Stuenkel and historian Sydney Leite as guests. https://www.youtube.com/live/-_UFtURHa-8	2:12:35	24.2.2022	444 491
Gabriela Prioli	Guerra na Ucrânia: o que você precisa saber? – Com Nelson Garrone. (War in Ukraine: what do you need to know? With Nelson Garrone) https://youtu.be/xNqw9hW2W1g	42:32	9.3.2022	81 591
Rita von Hunty	Video: Otan, Ucrânia E Rússia: O Poder Da Ideologia (NATO, Ukraine and Russia: The Power of Ideology) https://youtu.be/2CiLnUKPfrl	26:27	10.3.2022	607 546

November 2024). Thus, the data consists of four videos from four influencers (see [Tables 2 & 3](#)). The outspoken aim of these relatively long YouTube videos, as expressed by their producers, was to explain the background of the war or some aspects of the war, such as media coverage. The influencers selected had previously produced educational content, but were also politically outspoken or involved, having voiced political opinions. However, they were not members of Lula's Workers Party or supporters of Bolsonaro. All the influencers produce content on politics, geopolitics, or social issues such as racism or social equality.

The influencers we studied

The first influencer is Rita von Hunty, a persona created by Guilherme Terreri Lima Pereira, a leftist influencer, teacher, and speaker, who produces content on his educational-political YouTube channel *Témpero Drag*. He started out producing more entertaining content but evolved toward informative and educational videos addressing political and societal issues such as racism and social inequality (e.g., Santos & Sirtori, 2020). Von Hunty addressed the Russia-Ukraine war and its coverage by focusing on ideology. Von Hunty typically cites academic and post-colonial literature, often reading quotes from the works of scholars, activists, and politicians, explicitly positioning in among post-colonial scholars. In the video dealing with the war, von Hunty used the work of Aimé Césaire and Terry Eagleton, among others.

The second influencer, Heni Ozi Cuckier, known as Professor HOC on YouTube, is a geopolitics expert and teacher at the Getúlio Vargas Institute. He represents the liberal right of the Brazilian political scene, and at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, he was a member of the legislative body of the São Paulo State Parliament and a candidate to become a federal senator. On YouTube, his channel is informational and educational, not openly political, and he addresses geopolitical and global political topics. Professor HOC's videos gained popularity during the war, and he was invited to participate in several popular podcasts to discuss the conflict and the geopolitical situation. HOC generally does not refer to other scholars or studies. His videos are simple, pedagogical, and typical lectures, and he avoids using excessive visual elements. In a YouTube live shot right at the start of the full-scale invasion, HOC discussed the war and its background, first alone (30 min), and then with two guests: political scientist Oliver Stuenkel and historian Sydney Leite.

Gabriela Prioli is an author and commercial Instagram influencer, and at the time of the Russian full-scale invasion, was a popular presenter on the news outlet CNN and a political commentator. Prioli later resigned due to her male colleague's behavior during shows. She made several videos on her personal informative YouTube channel, "À Prioli," explaining the situation and the background of the war with different experts as guests. With journalist and

editor Nelson Garrone, they discussed the narrative battle. Prioli emphasizes dialogue and education in opinion formation.

YouTube content creator Felipe Castanhari is a textbook example of the emerging, increasingly important role of social media influencers, especially YouTubers, in the current information ecology. Castanhari's channel *Canal Nostalgia* was initially humorous but has evolved into an educational channel over the years since 2016. He produces videos or documentaries about interesting political and historical topics, such as Fascism and Brazilian history. Castanhari uses the help of professional historians, whose names are mentioned in the videos. However, during the videos, he does not separate different information sources or cite sources. As he presents all the information, it gives an impression of him being an expert, blurring the lines between experts and content creators.

Methods

In the analysis, we used previous studies on Russia's strategic narratives during the conflict in Ukraine (since 2014) (Khaldarova, 2021; Pynnöniemi, 2016; Szostek, 2017; Wirtschafter, 2022) and Ukrainian strategic narratives (Kaneva, 2023). In addition, we examined the findings in light of research on the discourses or framing of the war in the Brazilian media in 2022 (Guazina et al., 2023).

The videos were studied using a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analytical approach (Sam, 2019). Foucauldian discourse centers around power and knowledge, and unlike in most of the scholarship on strategic narratives (e.g., Miskimmon et al., 2014), the user or speaker of the discourse does not have agency. Still, it is the discourse that has agency. Adopting a Foucauldian understanding, Miskimmon et al. (2014) understand discourse as a "set of meanings and practices that contain rules about what is say-able and know-able and that create roles which actors fill" (p. 7) that function as "raw material of communication, – bodies of knowledge about science, law, history, theology – that actors plot into narratives" (p. 7). Understanding strategic narratives as produced, reproduced, projected and *controlled* by people, their creators, is an agent centric, positivist, understanding of strategic narratives which relies on an individualist ontology, and tends to overestimate the role of agents (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Kaneva, 2023), while Foucauldian understanding of discourses shifts focus toward societal structures and interplay of knowledge and power, making discourse a useful analytical concept (Kaneva, 2023). Yet, our approach has some limitations, as it risks downplaying the agency of individual influencers and groups who actively engage with and contest the narratives.

The videos were studied by focusing on specific themes. First, we watched the videos to get an overview of their content and the styles of the videos.

Second, textual transcripts were drawn from YouTube, and the first round of coding was conducted by the first author, who watched videos several times and took notes focusing on how the protagonists talked about the war and its causes. After the first rounds, the content of the videos was analyzed by focusing on the following themes: 1) the causes of the conflict and the culprits; 2) representations of Russia; 3) Ukraine; and 4) the “West,” including NATO and the United States; 5) the role Brazil has and should take regarding the conflict and in the international system. We also examined which sources of information the influencers mentioned. After this, two main discourses were formed around two different subject positions given to Brazil, offering different explanations for the conflict. Discourses consist of a combination of text/speech, images, and audiovisual elements.

Findings

While all the influencers expressed themselves as offering information rather than entertaining the viewers, their styles varied. Rita Von Hunty used funny elements, while the content was explicitly serious. HOC’s style was very traditional, reminiscent of a lecturer talking to the camera and using maps and infographics. Prioli and Garrone talked sitting on a sofa, commentators were in a “studio setting” with some additional media footage. In contrast, Castanhari spoke to the camera extensively using media footage from various sources. Castanhari’s media footage was mainly used as an “illustration.” However, sometimes he also used a combination of media footage and speech with a specific (ironic) tone to convey a message, such as when he showed footage of Donald Trump and criticized the United States for presenting itself as a protector of democracy, liberty and human rights while not hesitating to become involved in the internal affairs of other countries.

The material reveals that some influencers mixed different discourses while explaining the war. Specifically, two prominent discourses regarding Brazil’s geopolitical position in the war emerged: Brazil as a Western and a Global South country (see [Table 4](#)). These discourses construct different identities for Brazil as well as different understandings of the conflict. None of the influencers support Putin’s war in Ukraine. President Bolsonaro’s international isolation is mostly contested, while Lula’s discourse of Brazil as a significant diplomatic player, echoing the identity of an emerging economy, gained more support. Next, we present the two discourses.

Brazil as a western country

According to the Western discourse, Russia unilaterally started the war, a full-scale bloody invasion of an independent sovereign state. The invasion

Table 4. Discourses present in the videos.

Discourse	Representations of NATO, The US, The West	Representations of Russia	Representations of Ukraine, Ukrainians	Information sources, vocabulary	Video(s) where the discourse was present
Brazil as a Western country, Western discourse Prevalent in the US and major Western media outlets and US official sources in the spring 2022	Helping Ukraine, morally superior by arming Ukraine, preserve LIO	Sole aggressor, conducted an unprovoked invasion in Ukraine	Victim, Sovereign state, a nation, European, <i>Western?</i>	Western, academic sources, liberal legacy media, think tanks	Gabriela Prioli, Professor HOC, Felipe Castanhari
Brazil as a Global South country Drawing from the colonial past, “third world,” developing country identity Highlights peace; focus on countries and peoples of the Global South Linked to anti-capitalism	Hypocritical Imperialist Colonialist Racist	Neutral, great power	Piece on the game board, in Russian sphere of influencer	Post-colonial literature, Marxist concepts, anti-imperialist, anti-Western tones	Rita von Hunty, Felipe Castanhari

challenged the global security environment and the rules-based system and posed an existential threat to Ukraine.

Western discourse was visible in describing the war with expressions familiar from Western leaders’ speeches and media outlets. The war was described as an “unprovoked attack,” shaking the foundations of the international system. As Professor HOC stated at the beginning of the video, the invasion was “bigger and more shocking than 9/11”, “shaking the foundations of the international order” (1:27). Placing the 9/11 attack in the US as the most shocking event of the previous decades is a Western-centric understanding of global affairs, implicitly placing the experiences of Western people at the center.

In Western discourse, Western countries are represented as guardians of democracy and justice, as morally superior actors who support Ukraine in the war effort. Western countries strive to preserve the rule-based liberal international order, while Russia challenges the order with its reprehensible actions.

According to Professor HOC, “Putin’s logic is not the same as *ours*, Western democracies” (HOC 2:51), directly placing Brazil among the Western nations. Western nations were described as “the free World” (HOC, 7:07) and the war

as a “total invasion” (HOC, 7:37), a sovereign nation being invaded by an autocrat (Prioli, 0:34).

Aligning with the Western discourse, Professor HOC urged Brazil to take care of its international reputation and condemn Russia’s unilateral unprovoked aggression stating that “Brazil cannot sit on the fence” (HOC 26:13), the positioning that challenged the traditional impartiality of the Brazilian political leaders, both then president Jair Bolsonaro and former president Lula. Following the international relations realist scholars, Professor HOC considered the multipolar world to be a possible cause of conflict and considered it “very dangerous for Brazil to move away from the group of democratic Western states” (HOC, 1:23:56).

In the data, the Western discourse was represented by three of the influencers: Professor HOC, Gabriela Prioli, and Felipe Castanhari. In the conversation with the two experts, Prioli and her guest, editor, and YouTuber Nelson Garrone, both explicitly condemned Russia, but Garrone offered a more critical point of view from the perspective of Western media. The information sources linked to Prioli’s video were mostly Western: BBC, CNN, and Deutsche Welle. Al Jazeera was presented as an additional and alternative news source, while RT, Russian state-affiliated media directed at international audiences (formerly known as *Russia Today*), was labeled as Russian propaganda.

Aligning with the Western discourse did not necessarily imply alignment with Western countries, particularly the United States, but with democratic values and the broader struggle between democracy and autocracy (Kaneva, 2023) and the Western cultural sphere. The influencers opposed the Brazilian leadership at the time and criticized President Bolsonaro’s close ties with Putin and other authoritarian leaders. While pointing out that it is understandable and natural that (European) journalists relate to Ukrainians, “to a culture that resembles your own” (6:48), Prioli also seemed to include Brazilians to those consuming Western/European media content, content that “we have been consuming as long as we can remember” (6:32).

Brazil as a Global South country

The second discourse represented Brazil as an economically and politically developing or emerging country in the Global South. Taking an anti-imperialist positioning, the Global South discourse echoed the ideas of the Third World and constructed Brazil as one of the countries that has suffered from European colonialism and continues to suffer from the injustice of rich countries. The discourse questioned the hegemonic position and *hypocrisy* of the West and/or the Global North, especially the United States, thus echoing the historical tradition of criticizing cultural, political, and economic

imperialist influence of the United States in the Latin American region (e.g., Ellner, 2024).

In this discourse, the Russian full-scale invasion was represented not as an existential threat, but as just one of many ongoing conflicts in the world – most of which have not received any attention in the global (or Western) media. Ukraine was represented mostly as an object of big players' actions, an unlucky by-stander in the conflict that takes place on its soil, granting Russia the status of a great power. The Russian invasion was neither denied nor supported, but the focus was shifted to the *reasons* for the invasion, and the hypocrisy and Western centrism of the Western media, politicians, as well as ordinary people. NATO and the United States were also seen as being responsible for the conflict for enlarging their influence in Russia's sphere: "On the one hand, you have NATO imperialism, and on the other, Putin's defensive expansionism, which is perhaps the worst thing about Russian politics" (von Hunty, 9:13).

The Global South discourse was also critical of Western countries' racism. Rita von Hunty focused on the media spectacle-like nature of the war, and the hypocrisy of Western journalists, especially the "fascist dick" (16:33) who expressed their shock about the war in "civilized Europe," where the victims are blue-eyed and white-skinned.

Influencers did not necessarily use the term Global South, or South, but placed Brazil within this framework, in which white Europeans are racists, and Brazilians represent their Other. Racism and Eurocentrism were not only criticized by the leftist actors. Among the influencers, von Hunty, Prioli, and Castanhari dealt with racism as part of the media coverage of the war. Gabriela Prioli's guest, Nelson Garrone, also looked at the biased imagery of the war by Western war correspondents for romanticizing Ukrainian resistance asking "when Syrians throw a Molotov cocktail against dictator Bashar al-Assad, did you think it was romantic or did you see them as potential terrorists" (4:51). Castanhari showed a clip of a video by U.S. based television network CBS circulating widely on the Internet, on African immigrants facing difficulties in crossing the border from Ukraine to Poland. Von Hunty, instead, showed a similar video compilation produced by a Russian state-affiliated propaganda outlet, Redfish.

The Global South discourse was connected to left-wing vocabulary and political message. Linking to it, the anti-capitalist discourse also represented the poor and workers of the world as victims of capitalist exploitation around the world. The workers in both countries, Ukraine and Russia, are the ones who suffer the most from this conflict (von Hunty, 9:38). Rita von Hunty represented the leftist discourse that echoed the old Soviet-era socialist and Third World discourses, reflecting anger toward Western countries and capitalism, the United States's imperialism, and European colonialism.

Von Hunty also addressed internal issues, questioning why *this* military conflict is referred to as a war, noting that "in four years without war in Brazil,

279,000 people died” and that there were 170 murders per day. Von Hunty further emphasized that there was an “undeclared war – a war against Indigenous peoples” (20:25). This criticism was aimed at Brazilian power holders and the ignorant Western media.

The anti-capitalist, Marxist concepts and vocabulary set von Hunty apart from other, more moderate positions. While explicitly stating that she is not an internationalist, von Hunty embraced Marxist concepts and finished the video with a famous citation: “Peace among ourselves, war to the tyrants” (26:03).

Brazil is part of the BRICS group, and a discourse of an emerging economy, a BRICS country could have emerged, but it did not. The BRICS countries did not have a unified position on the current invasion, and BRICS was only rarely mentioned by the influencers. Professor HOC discussed the meaning of the BRICS group for Brazil. He was skeptical and emphasized its role only as a reference group created around emerging economies and economic issues. His guest, Oliver Stuenkel, added that BRICS had been a useful cooperation forum for Brazil.

Influencers’ videos as a battlefield

In information ecology, influencers are not only the target audiences of strategic narratives but also serve as powerful amplifiers and disseminators of these narratives. Since the influencers’ videos are not strategic documents produced by official bodies, they typically contain fragments, traces, or clues of a range of discourses instead of amplifying them as such. Our study found two principal discourses that reflect the national geopolitical identity of Brazil, which take part in constructing larger strategic narratives, Brazil as a Western and a Global South country. While these two discourses were prominent, some traces of Russia’s strategic narratives or the Kremlin’s point of view can be found in Castanhari’s and von Hunty’s videos.

Contrary to the Western discourse, many influencers framed the war from a broader geopolitical perspective. For instance, Castanhari made it clear at the very beginning of the video that Russia under Putin attacked Ukraine, an independent state, continuing that although there was a war between Ukraine and Russia, the conflict was “part of a much longer dispute between two enemies – Russia and NATO” (2:40). Embracing Russian self-understanding as a great power, Castanhari compared Russia’s relationship with Ukraine to the United States and Mexico as follows:

So, Russia hates this story that NATO members can have armies closer and closer to it. And that makes sense. Just reverse this story to make it easier to understand. Do you think Americans would be happy if Russia started building its military bases in Mexico or Canada, right next to the US border? Obviously not. This is exactly how Russia sees this NATO dominance close to its borders. (5:29)

The way Castanhari explained Russia's point of view against NATO expansion as natural for a great power, the ungrateful role for smaller states, Ukraine, and Mexico, was that of an object of others' actions. The example has been used by the Realist school of IR scholars, such as Mearsheimer (2014), but it has also been expressed by Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, quite recently in his traditional end-of-year speech in a press conference in Moscow in December 2021. Without explicitly citing sources or proper contextualization of the claims, the line between explaining and *legitimizing* Russia's actions was blurred.

Traces of the Kremlin's perspective and strategic narratives were present indirectly, as above. Most overtly propagandist concepts and positions, such as genocide against Russians in the Donbass region, "Russophobia," "denazification," "special military operation," or Ukrainians not being a real nation, were not used by the influencers. However, Rita von Hunty put the word "war" in quotation marks (8:33) and referred to the "Nazi fascists" in Ukraine (7:38).

While Putin, as an authoritarian leader, is in the spotlight in many videos and explicitly represented as the culprit of the war, the way influencers addressed the role of ordinary Russians varied. Most videos depicted Russians as not guilty of waging Putin's war, a perspective that is undoubtedly in line with Russian narratives highlighting the apolitical nature of the Russian people. However, it also reflects reality in authoritarian and repressive Russia. Thus, a sub-discourse representing the war as Putin's war rather than a Russian war also emerged.

In many videos, Russia's point of view was explicitly challenged, and the current Russian system and its leaders were criticized explicitly by all the influencers. When the war was viewed through the lens of great power politics, Ukraine was portrayed as a mere piece on the geopolitical chessboard – a discourse that partially aligns with the Kremlin's narrative of Russia as a great power. However, Ukraine was neither regarded as a part of Russia nor denied its status as a sovereign nation.

Representations of Ukraine reflected both its position in the post-Soviet Eastern Europe – historically within Russia's sphere of influence – and its identity as a European nation. Emphasizing the Europeanness of Ukrainians clashed with the Kremlin narratives, which portrayed Ukraine as a young and divided nation (Kudlenko, 2023). The Ukrainian strategic narratives of a united nation subjected to decades of Russian colonialism or imperialism (Kiryukhin, 2015) were absent despite Brazil's own colonial past. Official narratives framing Ukraine as fighting for freedom of Europe or democracy (Kaneva, 2023) were not explicitly embraced either.

Historical context was provided by presenting events and historical facts, interpreted from the perspective of the global powers. Yet, Kyiv was often acknowledged as older than Moscow and it was argued that Ukraine or Ukrainians existed before Russia/Russians. In the context of the narrative

battle, it is worth noting that the Kremlin enjoys a long history of promoting anti-colonialism in the “Third World” and later the Global South countries. In contrast, Ukraine’s memory diplomacy and promotion of nationalistic historical narrative is comparatively recent.

The mix of discourses presented in the videos varied depending on the influencer: Prioli and HOC based their informative content primarily on their own expertise or that of their guests, whereas von Hunty explicitly referenced scholarly sources. Castanhari, in contrast, presented various perspectives – an approach typical of foreign news coverage in Brazil (e.g., Guazina et al., 2023). As Guazina et al. (2023) have shown, during the initial weeks of the war, the so-called Western perspective appeared in Brazilian mainstream media as just one among several viewpoints. Because Castanhari delivered all the information personally, he came across as an expert rather than a documentarist or news anchor.

Following the release of the video, Castanhari became the subject of intense criticism on social media for addressing the Holodomor and highlighting the lack of scholarly consensus regarding its classification – whether as a genocide orchestrated by Stalin against Ukrainians or as part of a broader famine affecting the Soviet Union. In the video, Castanhari emphasized that, irrespective of its causes, the Holodomor has become a central component of Ukraine’s national identity. His remarks provoked significant backlash, including accusations of “spreading Nazi propaganda” (Poder360, 2022). Notably, Brazil officially recognizes the Holodomor as a genocide, a position reflected in its educational curriculum, although this view is not universally shared internationally.

Later, as a guest on a popular Brazilian podcast, Castanhari expressed concern over the polarized nature of public discourse, describing it as “shameful” that certain topics could not be addressed without being compelled to take a side. Castanhari acknowledged his initial lack of knowledge about the Holodomor prior to producing the video and emphasized that this was precisely why subject-matter experts were consulted during its development. Nevertheless, during the podcast appearance (Podpah, 2022), he proceeded to outline the historical background of the Holodomor for the audience. Castanhari’s case illustrates the complex intersections of influencer roles particularly well. While he presented himself as a confident expert in his videos, his appearances on widely followed podcasts, such as Poddelas, where he was asked to comment on the trajectory of the war like a geopolitical analyst (Poddelas, 2022), highlight the blurred boundaries between entertainer, educator, and commentator. On one hand, his audience expected him to provide insights into the war; conversely, his expertise was strongly questioned.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have examined the YouTube influencers' videos as discursive battlefields (re)producing and contesting different discourses and strategic narratives on Russian war in Ukraine. Our study shows that while the influencers approached the war as part of the geopolitical battles between powerful players – Russia, the United States, and NATO – their videos also became sites of the narrative battle between Ukraine (and the so-called West), Russia, and their allies. Thus, by drawing on various information sources and historical trajectories, the influencers contributed to negotiating Brazilian national identity, constructing Brazil either as a Western democracy or as a representative of the Global South, which has suffered under European colonialism and US imperialism.

The influencer-educators are new actors in the attention economy, situated somewhere between entertainers, internet celebrities, political influencers, and journalist-like educators offering various, even competitive perspectives to their fairly young audiences. The varying positions of the influencers reflect different political positions but also different “knowledge regimes” and interpretations of Brazilian national identity and history. The societal roles of influencers are always shaped by the specific social context and its unique characteristics, including history, culture, the political system, and the education system. Thus, we can say that Brazilian YouTube reflects Brazilian society (Monteiro, 2022).

Research on the politicization of social media influencers has focused on influencers as political *endorsers*, typical especially of the US polarized two-party system (Goodwin et al., 2023; Riedl et al., 2023). In central European and Nordic multiparty systems, more diverse roles for influencers in political discourse have been identified (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Reinikainen et al., 2025). Our study on Brazil – a politically polarized country where wealth is distributed unevenly and access to quality education is not universal – contributes new insights into the underexplored context of Latin America and the global south countries.

As we have demonstrated in this study, influencers convey ideas and political ideologies (Arnesson, 2023) in subtle ways and amplify narratives, wittingly and unwittingly. This is evident in Brazil and many other countries, as young people increasingly get information from social media and via influencers (Reuters, 2024). The authenticity of influencers can be harnessed to promote the goals of various actors (Pelevina, 2025), as well as educational and informational content, which includes the selection and deselection of perspectives and information. *Whose* interpretation of current or historical events does the influencer amplify?

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the influencers' participation in the societal discussion is challenged by their followers or the public (Artuni, 2022). The difficulty of meeting the followers' diverse expectations while balancing the roles of entertainer, expert, and educator became visible in the case of Castanhari's treatment of the Holodomor. In addition, Professor HOC, an expert in geopolitics and, at the beginning of the war, a popular guest on several popular podcasts and television programs, could not convert his social media popularity, expertise, and strong visibility on various platforms into electoral success in general elections in 2022 when he was a candidate for the Senate.

As previous studies have argued, to be effective, strategic narratives must be compatible with prevailing political myths or identity narratives (Krebs, 2015; Schmitt, 2018). In Brazil, national identity is contested, comprising both Western and "Southern" elements. Consequently, the Ukrainian narrative constructing Ukraine as a Western, European nation and a victim of Russian/Soviet colonialism, particularly aimed at Western audiences (Fomenko, 2023; Kaneva, 2023), aligned with the Westernizing discourse, in which Brazil is positioned as part of the West. However, this narrative is not compatible with Global South discourses opposing Western hegemonic positioning, as Ukraine is perceived as a white European country. Despite Ukrainian efforts to frame Russia as an imperialist power (Kurnyshova, 2024), within the Brazilian traditional left, colonialism and imperialism are predominantly associated with Western actors, namely Europe and the United States.

Given that influencers rarely cite sources with academic rigor, if at all, tracing the dissemination of ideas and ideologies within an increasingly fragmented digital media landscape becomes significantly more complex. Therefore, we have demonstrated how subtle and interwoven the use of different discourses is. By examining vocabulary, concepts, and information sources, it becomes possible to identify overtly propagandistic content and situate contesting perspectives, such as "special military operation" and "full-scale invasion." Thus, rather than focusing narrowly on "disinformation," the focus should be directed toward divergent historical interpretations and ideological underpinnings that shape historical and political discourses. Therefore, despite the criticism (e.g., Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019), strategic narratives offer a useful conceptualization and analytical framework to trace back different discourses. Yet, distinguishing between the traditional critiques of U.S. imperialism and European colonialism voiced by the Brazilian or broader Latin American left and the Kremlin's contemporary strategic narratives can at times prove difficult.

While giving visibility to some narratives, obfuscating sources, and legitimating some interpretations, influencers function as "educational-political actors." Thus, they may participate in soft power, propaganda, or memory

diplomacy endeavors. Considering the growing power of influencers, in the political and social debates both in domestic politics and in international politics, it is evident that social media influencers' informative, educational-political content deserves scholarly interest also in the future.

Further studies should, for example, focus on the role and relationship between the influencer and their information sources and the influencer-follower interaction in the formation of discourses. In addition, the context of emerging countries, where income disparities and inadequate educational systems may create opportunities for educational-political influencers, should be explored further.

The role of commercial platforms in which certain ideologies are embedded would also be worth reflecting on. While platforms often position themselves as promoters of freedom of expression, content is also “censored,” often without explicitly instructing content creators. Thus, influencers who produce content on commercial social media platforms must learn how to “please the algorithm” to gain visibility, monetize their content, or have external funding.

Like any other research, our study also faces some limitations. We analyzed only four videos by four influencers, focusing on discourses rather than individual influencers. This approach may overlook the agency of individual creators. Employing alternative methodologies and a broader sample could yield a more nuanced understanding of these differences. Future research could also explore other platforms – particularly Instagram and TikTok – and adopt a comparative, cross-platform approach to examine a larger and more diverse group of influencers, not only in Brazil but across various countries.

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