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Instagram as an affective battlefield

Patriotic inspirational influencers as strategic narrators

Abstract: This chapter studies the different roles Ukrainian social media influencers have adopted during the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine that started in February 2022. Using social media data gathered from influencers' Instagram profiles and an online questionnaire sent to prominent Ukrainian social media influencers, this chapter shows how the war affected the influencers' practices and how they participated in communicating about the war. Drawing from social media influencers' politization scholarship, the international relations conceptualization of strategic narratives, and theories of affectivity in the public sphere, this chapter shows how influencers navigate between commercial, political, and lifestyle content in the communication environment changed by the war. They function as information disseminators by spreading information and amplifying Ukrainian strategic narratives, as social activists by calling their followers to participate by donating, and as patriotic inspirational influencers promoting Ukrainian culture and nationalistic narratives of history. Influencers bring the horrors and the exceptionality of the war to their followers while also showing and living its everydayness.

Keywords: social media influencers, Ukraine, war, strategic narratives, affective economy

1 Introduction

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, digital spaces were instantly included as battlefields. Social media platforms filled up with shocking images depicting collapsing buildings, civilians evacuating from Ukrainian cities, and soldiers and civilians alike taking up arms. Regular Ukrainian social media users started sharing information about war events and urging the international community to react and NATO to close the sky over Ukraine. By January 2024, the war had continued for almost two years, and Ukraine had managed to stay in the media spotlight and on the political agenda both in Western countries and globally. Ukraine has arguably benefitted from the power of social media, effectively leveraging civilian and military influencers, following the lead

of Instagram-savvy president Volodymyr Zelenskiy (Helmus, 2023; Plazas-Olmedo & López-Rabadán, 2023).

Adding to citizen journalists – that is, everyday citizens reporting online from conflict zones (Allan et al., 2007) – and dedicated war commentators such as mil-bloggers and warbloggers (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Wall, 2005), a new group of professional and semiprofessional social media users has adopted war content in their feeds: social media influencers. Social media influencers are generally active social media content creators with either a remarkable following or a smaller but dedicated audience, who mainly address lifestyle topics and may participate in commercial collaborations (Borchers, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). Since February 2022, Ukrainian lifestyle influencers have worked to bring the reality of the war from an ordinary person’s perspective to their followers and to a broader audience with English language content (Divon & Krutrök, 2023; Sato, 2022). While lifestyle influencers’ recent emergence as “war influencers” has not gone unnoticed, their activities remain understudied.

Prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, many Ukrainian influencers used online platforms for commercial activities by monetizing their everyday lives as lifestyle influencers or marketing their companies’ products and services. Influencers’ close and even intimate relationships with their audiences (Abidin, 2015), authenticity, and perceived relatability make their product recommendations and endorsements effective (Pöyry et al., 2019). As recent studies have shown, influencers may also have a powerful role in shaping the political opinions of their audiences (Harff & Schmuck, 2023) or function as ideological intermediaries (Arnesson, 2023). Not surprisingly, different actors have realized the potential of lifestyle influencers and aim to use their reach and persuasion skills to promote a desired viewpoint, give a human touch to state strategic communication (Reinikainen et al., 2022), or disseminate propaganda (Pelevina, 2023; Ryan et al., 2022).

In the information realm, the parties to a war try to justify their actions to multiple audiences. International relations scholars have introduced the concept of strategic narratives, which refers to narratives intentionally produced or put together by political elites, usually state actors, to legitimate their actions (Colley, 2019; Miskimmon et al., 2014). In digital media spaces, different actors participate in narrative battles. Holding central positions in the information web, many popular lifestyle influencers have harnessed their platforms and used their skills to amplify the Ukrainian perspective.

Lifestyle influencers typically have their own established communication strategies and ways of branding their content (Enke & Borchers, 2019). They typically rely on highly visual platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, and focus on specific audiences and topics. Therefore, politicization (Pöyry, 2023; Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022) often marks a shift in lifestyle influencers’ typical

communication patterns and forces them to find ways to balance different types of messages. Because political content coexists with the lifestyle and commercial content typical of online platforms, influencers must negotiate a combination of different roles and communication styles. In the case of Ukraine, this means combining war reporting and related strategic narratives with lifestyle content.

In this chapter, we study how Ukrainian influencers have participated in communicating about the war, disseminated the strategic narratives, and negotiated their roles, genres, and practices in a media context transformed by war. Theoretically, we draw from scholarship on social media influencers' politicization (Arneson, 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022), the international relations conceptualization of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Roselle et al., 2014), and theories of affective economy and the affective public sphere (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b; Nikunen, 2019; Papacharissi, 2015). To do this, we focus on prominent Ukrainian social media influencers, ranging from nanoinfluencers to macroinfluencers (Abidin, 2021; Woolley, 2022) residing in either Ukraine or abroad, who have participated in posting war-related content on their social media platforms. Our social media data come from Instagram, which is especially popular among young urban citizens and widely used by politicians, writers, artists, journalists, photographers, and other influential characters and opinion leaders (Antonova et al., 2020) as well as commercial actors. The most popular local influencers have millions of followers (Plusone Social Impact, 2023).

Overall, this chapter extends our understanding of the tensioned role of social media influencers in conflict situations and contributes to the emerging research on influencers "going political" (Suuronen et al., 2022) in the context of global political conflicts. Based on an online questionnaire and social media data from February 2022 to September 2023, we show how influencers adopted different practices and negotiated the ways in which they combined strategic, affective, and commercial viewpoints during the first year and a half of the full-scale invasion. They functioned as (1) information disseminators, providing first-hand information from Ukraine; (2) activists, mobilizing their followers to support; and (3) inspirational patriots who have helped build consciousness of a shared past and understanding of current events and the paths to a desired future. By adopting these roles, the influencers have intermediated strategic narratives and engaged in shaping Ukraine's collective memory and national identity at a time of war.

2 Strong, united, and European: Ukrainian national identity and strategic war narratives

During the current war, Ukrainian resilience has gained much attention in Western media (Kudlenko, 2023), while Ukrainian strategic narratives seem to have resonated well among Western audiences. Referring to narratives carefully produced by political elites to convince their audiences, strategic narratives are a “means to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors” to “extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 2). Successful narratives appeal to the values, interests, and prejudices of the target audience and draw on existing, enduring identity narratives or political myths (Bottici, 2007; Krebs, 2015; Schmitt, 2018).

The Ukrainian narratives targeting Ukrainian, European, or Western audiences more broadly, construct Ukraine as a strong united nation fighting for its independence and sovereignty (Zakharchenko, 2022) and also, later, for freedom and democracy beyond Ukrainian borders. These narratives highlight the revival of national traditions, culture, and language, as well as identifying with Europe. Russia is represented as the occupier, the aggressor, and a terrorist state “driven by Moscow’s ancient hatred of all Ukrainians and by its baseless imperial dreams” (Zakharchenko, 2022). The image of Russia as the enemy also draws from familiar Cold War imagery and discourses of communism versus capitalism, now formulated as autocracy versus democracy – framing that resonates with Western audiences (Kaneva, 2023). Stressing sacrifice, the narratives depict Ukraine as (historically) enslaved by Russia (or the Soviet Union). The experience of the collective tragedy of Holodomor, the famine caused by Stalin’s regime in the 1930s, constitutes the basis for national integration and identity (Kiryukhin, 2015). Hostility toward Russia, adherence to the nationalist narrative of Ukrainian history, and support for the predominance of the Ukrainian language have become the cornerstones of the widely shared and promoted strategic war narratives and national identity (Kulyk, 2023, cited by Korostelina & Toal, 2023).

During the conflict, various actors, from political power holders and army personnel to ordinary citizens, have participated in disseminating and producing Ukrainian strategic narratives (Zakharchenko, 2022). These “narrative intermediaries” (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Zhabotynska & Velivchenko, 2019) include social media influencers – individuals who have accumulated a dedicated audience online. Influencers’ relatability, authenticity, and ability to cultivate parasocial relationships with their dedicated followers make them interesting actors for political elites to reach wider audiences on visual social media platforms – further high-

lighting the increasing importance of emotional appeals and visuality (Crilley, 2015; Miskimmon et al., 2014, pp. 22, 112).

2.1 Creating affective alignment with strategic narratives

Overall, social media platforms have become an arena for rival perspectives and narratives, where multiple actors, including states, politicians, army personnel (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009), insurgent actors, media (including war correspondents), and ordinary people alike try to get their stories heard. As Van Noort (2020) suggested, the persuasiveness of narratives about the past depends on their ability to translate historical ideas across time and space. Strategic narratives draw from existing discourses, and the power of narratives relies on their ability to resonate with the intended audience's values and emotions (Freedman, 2006, p. 23; Grigor & Pantti, 2021; Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 112). One prominent approach to theorizing the emotional resonance of narratives comes from the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b), who set out to understand the circulation of affective narratives in society, specifically in connection to nations and nationalism. According to her theorizing of the affective economy, strategic narratives and nationalism gain power from collective, shared affects that accumulate value through the repetition of the signs and figures to which they are attached. Individuals, therefore, align with communities through emotions that make identification with the collective body possible (Ahmed, 2004b). Therefore, emotions are a resource for those in power or aiming for power. One way for political actors to exercise power is by changing the emotional atmosphere of a society or by generating new "regimes of feeling" (Reddy, 2001).

Affective strategic narratives thus work by mobilizing specific signs to create affective attachment and alignment with a nation (Ahmed, 2004b). It has been suggested that such emotionally resonating communication can be quite powerful in shaping public opinion (e.g. Davies, 2018), and consequently, it has been adopted to strategically narrate war and conflicts (e.g. Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020) and, more broadly, in nationalist discourses (e.g. Horsti, 2016). Nevertheless, affects always work in a contextual setting, which makes them volatile. Ahmed's theory of circulating affective signs also highlights the social and collective nature of affects; they are influenced by cultural norms, social structures, technologies, and practices (Ahmed, 2004a; Nikunen, 2019; Wetherell, 2012). Therefore, affects should be studied with sensitivity to the social context and include both national and technological elements.

It has been argued that affectivity is particularly embedded in the current platformed media ecosystem. Affects not only mediate information and narratives but

also invite actors to express their emotions. Affectivity and affective attunements are essential for creating a digital presence, surfacing collective feelings, and forming networked publics in digital environments between virtual bodies (e.g. Ahmed, 2004c; Papacharissi, 2015; Persson, 2017). Hence, as an infrastructure, social media platforms support and encourage the sharing and circulation of affective content.

Correspondingly, both the media practices and content types typical of Instagram are profoundly affective. First, it has been recognized that social media influencers play an important role as producers of affective atmospheres through their affective labour (e.g. Abidin, 2015; Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021; Reinikainen et al., 2022). Second, visual content, in particular, is typically easily imbued with affects (Blair, 2004). Digital images are sticky surfaces on which affects nest (Ahmed, 2004a; Horsti, 2016), and they have the capacity to bring visibility and urgency to the issues to which they are attached (Pantti, 2016). In visual content, complex social and political issues can be reduced to simplistic visual frames that promote certain problem definitions, causal interpretations, or moral evaluations (Coleman, 2010; Zelizer, 2010), albeit accompanied by a more accentuated risk of alternative interpretations. Images carry with them the historical repetition of meanings that gives them power as political tools, thereby making their circulation relevant for both strategic narratives and affects. Indeed, previous studies emphasized the centrality of visual content for digital political communication and political rhetoric (e.g. Laaksonen et al., 2022; Leaver et al., 2020; Luhtakallio & Meriluoto, 2022; Seo, 2019). Likewise, in war reporting, images convey political messages and function as affective anchors (Grigor & Pantti, 2021). There is, therefore, reason to believe that affectivity is even more highlighted when strategic narration takes place within the affective and visual cultures on Instagram.

3 Methods: studying “Instagram as a battlefield”

Studying a country at war requires paying special attention to methodological processes, as we learned when engaging with our empirical field, our methodological approach being a combination of online observation, an online questionnaire, and qualitative analysis of social media content. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, we noticed how popular Ukrainian social media influencers started sharing information, images, and footage from the war zone and asking for help from the international community. During the first days, many also tried to appeal to their Russian counterparts. Since the beginning of the invasion, we have followed some influencers and paid attention to their consistency and perseverance in war-related postings. While mainstream (Western) media outlets’ attention started to shift to other topics, influencers continued posting about the war.

In the spring of 2023, one year after the invasion, our intention while planning this chapter was to interview Ukrainian influencers who had posted war-related content. We approached a Ukrainian influencer marketing company and prominent influencers directly. However, the promising collaboration proved challenging. The overall atmosphere in Ukraine was tense. The country was eagerly awaiting a counterattack by the Armed Forces of Ukraine that would change the dynamics on the battlefield. Influencers, although grateful to their foreign networks for their help, also started to feel fatigued by constantly having to convince them. Hence, we decided instead to opt for an online questionnaire. In July 2023, we reached out to prominent Ukrainian social media influencers ($n = 42$) using an open-ended questionnaire. We started with a list of influencers who one of the authors had followed for years, updated the list using the online ranking site Statista's listing of popular Ukrainian influencers (Statista, 2023), and asked Ukrainian university students to share the names of the influencers they frequently followed. The inclusivity of the sample was emphasized by targeting influencers across different tiers, ranging from microinfluencers with smaller audiences to macroinfluencers with tens of thousands of followers (Abidin, 2021; Woolley, 2022). Some influencers would exclusively target Ukrainian audiences, while others residing outside the country would convey information to their local subscribers.

The English version of the questionnaire yielded 12 responses, while the Ukrainian version resulted in more substantial participation, with 23 respondents out of 42. However, some influencers hesitated to open the questionnaire link, citing repercussions such as account suspension or closure due to unfair practices, and refrained from participation. In their responses to us, some complained of significant restrictions on their activities due to Instagram's policy for publishing war-related content. This illuminates the multifaceted ways in which Instagram functions as a battlefield, and it portrays the platform not only as a space for social interaction but also as a battleground on which issues of content sensitivity, policy compliance, and research outreach intersect.

The questionnaire included a set of background questions to identify the influencers' profiles (e.g. content type, adopted platforms, intended audiences, language, professional age), ten Likert-style questions to identify the changes in their practices, and nine open-ended questions to describe these changes in more detail. The questionnaire played a central role in understanding the thoughts and experiences of Ukrainian influencers during a year and a half of the war. The Likert-style questions allowed us to gain an impression of the prevalence of the observed changes, while the open-ended questions provided more qualitative insights into the ways in which the influencers described and justified their experiences and articulated their new roles.

To enhance the picture drawn from the questionnaire data, we decided to analyse the Instagram posts of the influencers in more detail. The Instagram profiles of the same sample of 42 influencers were studied using both the CrowdTangle tool offered by Meta and the Instagram app, which was used to access their stories and highlights. We analysed the influencers' posts from February 2022 to September 2023, focusing on war-related posts, including their frequency, content, style, and affective attunement. This was done by the first and second authors. While browsing through the influencers' profiles and posts, we noticed how, at the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion, they had constantly posted about the war, but gradually, the number of war-related posts diminished, and many influencers started addressing other topics. In the findings section, we show how, through an analysis of the questionnaire data, the influencers adopted various positions and adjusted their content to fit the changing situations juxtaposing social media content during a year and a half of conflict.

4 Information, inspiration, and calls for help

The outbreak of the war in 2022 hit Ukraine's advertising and marketing industry hard (IAB Ukraine, 2022), forcing commercial actors, companies, and influencers to take sides, and fused commercial and political spaces. When we initiated our online observations in February 2022, we noticed how the Russian attack marked a change in many influencers' normally well-curated, even serene, Instagram feeds. Regular Instagram content – fashion shots, gym selfies, and morning coffees – were replaced with images or videos of airstrikes, footage from bomb shelters, and calls for help aimed at the international community (Figure 1a). Images and textual content first conveyed shock, then anger and sadness.

The influencers described the start of the full-scale invasion as a profound change – a “shock to many” that affected both their social media practices and their state of mind. They, too, were citizens who had to react to the situation and were faced with the same emotions as their fellow citizens – fear, anger, and mental paralysis – thereby depicting emotions that became collective for the entire nation (Ahmed, 2004b).

It had a negative effect; the strength to do something disappeared. (R16, Instagram/TikTok influencer)

The influencers adopted different strategies and adapted their roles to fit the new reality. In the following sections, we describe the four major roles we identified for

the influencers – namely, information disseminators, public activists, war diarists, and patriotic inspirers.

4.1 War enters Instagram

The start of the invasion changed the influencers' social media practices. While some mentioned using social media less than before the war, others reported that they had started to adjust their posting strategies to the situation and shifted from depicting their personal lives to sharing news and information. Almost all respondents had regularly or occasionally shared war-related information aimed at foreign audiences or audiences in their countries of residence (e.g. news links, videos of war events) as well as personal content about their daily lives during the war. Most had also shared requests for help, such as links to charitable organizations' campaigns. The majority also reported having shared content targeted at Ukrainian audiences, such as information about aid campaigns or motivational content. Thus, they engaged in circulating signs for solidarity in the affective economy (Ahmed, 2004a).

Graphic content depicting war events was common, especially at the beginning of the invasion, when the aim was to show the world the atrocities Russia was committing in Ukraine, and later, when something unusually brutal happened or was revealed, such as the uncovering of mass graves in Bucha in April 2022 or the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam in June 2023. Visually similar to news reporting or the traditional imagery of wars or catastrophes, the images used in posts and stories show the ugly side of the war – the bombings, the suffering of civilians, and the destroyed buildings. Shocking images evoke negative emotions, anger, and hate, as well as sadness and compassion, and motivate foreign audiences to help.

As time passes, sharing such imagery typically decreases – perhaps the images lose their shock effect – a phenomenon known as compassion fatigue (Moeller, 2002). Yet, the influencers continued to engage in other practices to keep the war alive on Instagram.

I will try to do everything to make people aware and not forget that we still have a war going on. (R19, Instagram influencer)

Many influencers regularly used Instagram Stories to share graphic war-related content while occasionally posting appeals or statements that stood out from their otherwise serene feeds, following visual conventions typical of Instagram activism (Figure 1a–c). In addition to informative content and appeals, posts includ-



Figure 1a, b, and c: An influencer’s post aimed at foreign audiences calling for NATO to deploy forces to Ukraine (a). Other influencers’ posts calling Russia a terrorist state (b) and reminding audiences that the war, “Russian hell”, had lasted for seven months (c).

ed statements and simple visualizations of the Ukrainian war narrative depicting Russia as the enemy (Zakharchenko, 2022). Like citizen journalists, influencers share information and disseminate the Ukrainian perspective, which serves to amplify strategic narratives.

4.2 Public social activism

Apart from sharing information, the war situation also encouraged influencers to act in concrete societal and political ways. Many started volunteering or acting as public activists. This role was also linked to distributing information, but it was most clearly characterized by volunteer work, donating to the army or NGOs, and mobilizing followers.

70% of volunteer content now. 30% for everything else. (R12, Instagram influencer)

Many influencers regularly asked for donations and linked to donation or charity organizations through their profiles and highlights (i. e. permanent stories pinned to their profiles). They helped collect donations from different NGOs for the army or directly for soldiers on the frontline. For example, influencers promoted an initiative in which ordinary people collected and sent warm clothes and stoves to the armed forces and sought donations (Figure 2a–c). Different from traditional humanitarian campaigns, during the war in Ukraine, influencers also participated in gathering funds for military equipment, such as drones (Figure 3a–c). Visuals of military equipment and militaristic vocabulary differed from most influencers’



Figure 2a, b and c: The Ukrainian influencer and the founder of the Association of Ukrainians in Pietarsaari (Finland) Yuliia Bondarchuk (@juliia.bondarchuk) promoted an initiative through which people collected and sent warm clothes and stoves to the armed forces.



Figure 3a, b and c: The influencer Ihor Lachenkov's posts (a) and (b) depict daily efforts of fundraising for drones by some of the most famous influencers who consistently support the Armed Forces of Ukraine: (a) from left to right: Serhiy Sternenko (@s_sternenko), Serhiy Prytula (@prytula.ua), and Ihor Lachenkov (@lachen_ty); (c) the influencer Lidiya Kosharska (@lidiya_kosharska) asks for donations for drones in her Instagram story.

typical commercial lifestyle content. While humanitarian efforts generally appealed to audiences' feelings of empathy, calls to participate in crowdfunding for the war required affects such as hate and anger to be evoked.

A specific type of activism relates to language politics. The social media data showed that some of the influencers used different languages while targeting different audiences – that is, Ukrainian for fellow Ukrainians and English for foreign audiences. Historically, many Ukrainians would use the Russian language on social media. Despite the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine since 2014, many commercial lifestyle influencers did not cut ties with the Russian market, due to its size

and importance for both global brands (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2022) and individual influencers. During the first weeks of the invasion, some appealed to their followers in Russia to protest against the Kremlin without much success. In the survey, several respondents confirmed our observation that many Ukrainian influencers stopped posting in Russian after the invasion began. One influencer frequently framed the situation and their activity as a broader cultural war:

Calls to abandon Russian music in order not to sponsor the enemy, also calls to abandon companies that have not left the Russian market [...] Spread the importance of abandoning Russian culture and transitioning to Ukrainian. (R17, Instagram influencer)

While some influencers explicitly called for cancelling the Russian state and Russian culture, music, and language, others encouraged their followers to familiarize themselves with Ukrainian literature, thereby promoting a nationalistic spirit. In the survey responses, some respondents mentioned Russian followers who had unsubscribed from their feeds or provided negative feedback. This was also visible in the social media data, since some influencers received and sometimes even commented on Russian followers' comments.

4.3 Living and blogging – the exceptional in the everyday

Influencer culture has its roots in blogging. Like bloggers, influencers typically share their feelings, thoughts, and everyday lives with their followers (Abidin, 2015). During the war, their Instagram profiles resembled online war diaries. In addition to destroyed buildings, casualties, and soldiers, influencers shared the relatable everyday lives of Ukrainian citizens, images of urban dwellers in coffee shops in downtown Kyiv, and photoshoots in the city centre of Lviv.

Sometimes, awareness of the constant presence of war was conveyed only through the affective states present in the images and captions. A photo of a child celebrating Easter was accompanied by a caption depicting the strength of Ukrainians in the face of the centuries-old brutality of the enemy. Thus, war also involves everyday things and small relatable moments (Heikkinen & Meriluoto, 2022). In Instagram, the exceptional coexists and merges with the everyday (Manovich et al., 2014). An image of a beautiful sunset in Kyiv with the caption “The moment after an air alert” at the same time captures the absurdness of the situation and its everydayness, following the rules of Instagram aesthetics.

The influencers developed a new strategy of balancing in situ. Many influencers did not post about politics or social issues before the war. When asked about their role, some stated that they felt a *responsibility* to use their status to spread

information and mobilize people. Some survey answers also indicated that the influencers considered critically their posting strategies and adapted them to the new reality by, for example, avoiding posting on days of heavy air strikes:

I started thinking about what and on what days to post (if [a missile] flew somewhere, I usually wouldn't shoot on that day). (R17, Instagram influencer)

Our questionnaire responses also suggested that audiences expected influencers to post about the war. Half of the respondents stated that the feedback they received changed after the invasion started. The influencers mentioned how audience comments became more serious and conscious, and one respondent even reported receiving aggressive feedback after posting regular content. Thus, pressured by social expectations, the influencers were invited to reinvent their professional identities. Emphasizing their role as influencers during this exceptional and hard time, one summarized:

I feel that I inspire and motivate people to live. (R2, Facebook influencer)

4.4 Patriotic inspiration

In addition to sharing information, keeping war diaries, and mobilizing their followers, influencers also shared inspirational nationalistic content. First, they shared historical posts to explain and give context to Russia's actions. History was typically invoked by telling stories about Holodomor, the famine caused by Stalin's regime in the 1930s during a period of struggle by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Figure 4a and b). These posts may have served to educate followers about Ukrainian history, support the nationalistic writing of history, and amplify the official strategic narratives and current war efforts by highlighting Russia as the historical enemy and oppressor (Kiryukhin, 2015; Korostelina & Toal, 2023).

By appealing to the collective memory of past sacrifices, these historical posts evoked deep sadness, hate, and anger toward the aggressor. Influencers participated in building national identity through past sacrifices, which is one strategy when reviving strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017). The message to fellow Ukrainians was, "We must not forget". The stories of Holodomor merged atrocities committed by the historical Soviet Union with the actions of contemporary Russia and helped justify and legitimate the war effort. As Sara Ahmed's (2004b) put it, collective expressions of hate and fear become "patriotic declarations of love" (p. 129).

Another type of war-related content was inspirational content, which took on a nationalistic tone and drew from common cultural signs. These posts did not

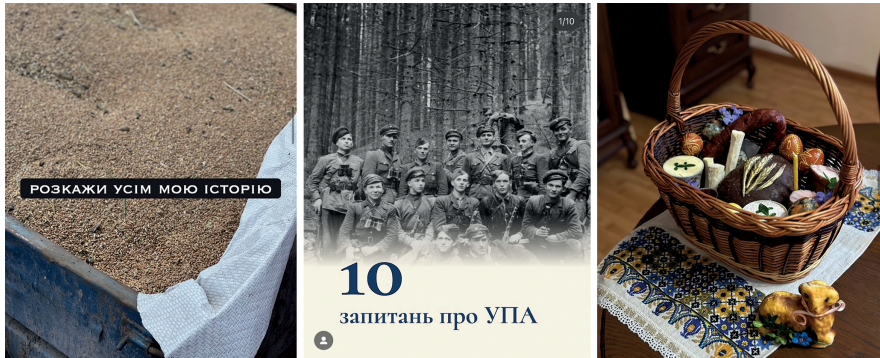


Figure 4a, b, and c: Posts by the Ukrainian influencer Yuliia Slyvka (@slyva_jalova_lova) tell a personal story about Holodomor (a), provide information about the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (b), and share her memories of celebrating Easter (c).

show images of war and sometimes did not even mention it; instead, they amplified official narratives by promoting the Ukrainian nation, its culture, and its history (Kiryukhin, 2015; Korostelina & Toal, 2023). Influencers often placed familiar signs/objects, such as flags or the colours of the Ukraine flag (Figure 5b), in their posts and dressed up in traditional costumes or shared photos from national romantic countryside locations. Strongly imbued with affect, these images evoke a sense of unity and revive a nostalgic imaginary past, thereby participating in building and strengthening a shared national identity and identity narrative. Combining modern trendy lifestyle and urban surroundings with traditional clothing, such as *vyshyvanka* shirts, brings the past to the present (Figure 5a and c). Inspirational content evokes a sense of pride in one's country and traditions.

Influencers also mentioned praying for peace and longing for the peaceful times of the past, expressing hope and belief that the future would bring peace. Posts portraying a peaceful future did not always mention the enemy; rather, the affective tone was nostalgic, hopeful, and empowering. The future orientation of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2014, p. 2; Roselle et al., 2014) was visually embodied in images of children, signifying that the war effort would lead to peace, reconstruction, and prosperity for children (Figure 5c).

Despite promoting patriotism and representing Ukraine as a united nation, the influencers also discussed domestic political issues that foreign war correspondents did not cover (Semchuk, 2023). They shared petitions to grant a fallen soldier war hero status, criticized Zelenskiy's language politics regarding the status of English in Ukraine, and shed light on gender inequality issues and corruption in the country. Influencers thus participated in negotiating national identity and citizenship not only by stressing the official strategic narratives and promoting national

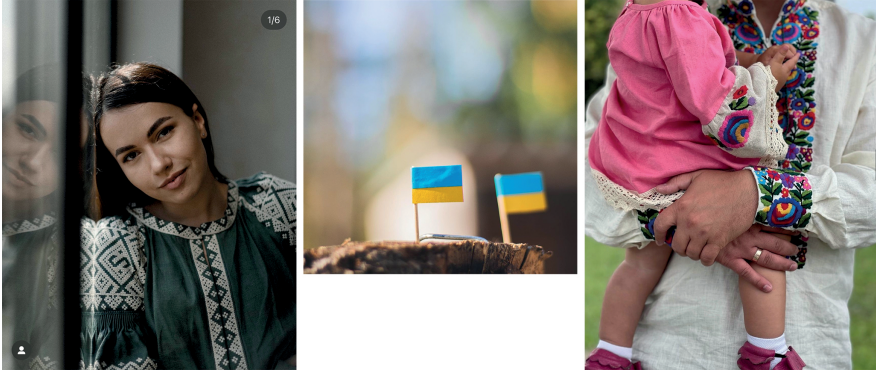


Figure 5a, b, and c: (a) the influencer Lidiia Kosharska (@lidiya_kosharska); (b) a post of two Ukrainian flags, published by another influencer; and (c) post by the Ukrainian influencer Yuliia Slyvka (@slyva_jalova_lova) of a woman and a child wearing traditional Ukrainian shirts (vyshyvanka).

romantic imaginary but also by challenging powerholders by offering diverse perspectives on internal political issues, thereby pushing the country toward the democratic ideals it aims to live up to.

5 Discussion: combining the commercial and the political

Overall, our empirical materials highlight how influencers adopted multiple roles in narrative battles during the war. First, they acted as information distributors, which was also a role highlighted by the survey respondents. In addition to sharing information and showing the world what was happening, influencers collected donations and acted as social activists. Reaching Ukrainian and foreign audiences alike, they helped amplify official strategic narratives of the war and participated in producing real-time narratives by functioning as new kinds of narrative intermediaries (Hellman & Wagnsson, 2015; Zhabotynska & Velivchenko, 2019). Influencers constructed themselves as the face of a brave, united Ukraine, a courageous nation fighting the aggressor – an imperialist and terrorizing enemy. Their calls for Ukrainians and their allies to support the army, participate in the volunteering effort, and cancel the culture of the occupiers repeated the Ukrainian war narratives (Zakharchenko, 2022) while also extending their role beyond the information domain to activism and crowdfunding the war (Boichak, 2017). The influencers participated in the national identity construction project by promoting Ukrainian cul-

ture, literature, and art and informing or reminding their followers of “our” common history, thereby strengthening the nationalist narrative of Ukraine (Kiryu-khin, 2015).

As a platform, Instagram is a prime example of our increasingly visual digital culture, and its affordances, features, and conventions impact the way influencers communicate and disseminate information (Leaver et al., 2020). Influencers are bound by platform affordances and attune their patriotic content to Instagram aesthetics, vernaculars, and stylistic conventions. In our analysis, the combination of the typical aesthetics of Instagram influencer culture and nationalism came together in the patriotic inspirational role – that is, influencers expressed patriotism and discussed the war using subtle signs within the traditional visual genres of Instagram. In the affective economy (Ahmed, 2004b), patriotic inspirational content gains power from the collective – shared affects that accumulate value through the repetition of affective signs and figures. Familiar images evoke a feeling of unity and personal stories, while collective memories from history tie current events to a shared past (Miskimmon et al., 2013). At the same time, they also project aspirations for a glorious and peaceful future that will arrive after the war. A specific feature of contemporary Ukrainian Instagram is the strong presence of influencers who have emigrated or are in exile. While influencers in Ukraine reminded their audiences outside Ukraine that the war was not over, those residing in other countries also seemed to remind their followers in Ukraine that *they* had not forgotten.

Most lifestyle influencers combined war-related content with light, entertaining everyday lifestyle and commercial content. The patriotic and the political coexisted with the commercial. Such a smooth coexistence has been shown to be typical for influencers addressing social, meaningful issues (Riedl et al., 2021) as well as those promoting radical ideological positions (Leidig, 2023). The war was often present in influencers’ posts as minor signs, such as a pin with a Ukrainian flag on a jacket, a sticker on a laptop, or text on a T-shirt. While showing everyday life in Ukrainian cities, influencers in Ukraine also reminded their audiences that life goes on despite the constant presence of the war. Indeed, apart from living, the influencers also had to make a living. Their survey responses also showed how they strived to combine their role as disseminators in the information war with more traditional modes of being influencers. While the majority reported that their commercial collaborations had declined as a result of the invasion, some experienced the opposite. Eight reported that they had collaborated with Ukrainian NGOs or official/state actors after the invasion. A year and a half after the Russian full-scale invasion, some Instagram influencers had returned to their commercial (or lifestyle) activities and combined them with occasional war-related content.

The art of being authentic, relatable, and commercially friendly at the same time is difficult in times of peace and requires further balancing in times of war. Authenticity on commercial social media has long been a subject of discussion (e.g. Pöyry et al., 2019; Tolson, 2010), but it is framed by a profound tension in Ukraine. In Instagram's hyper-commercial space, influencers cultivate authenticity, appearing real while being extremely produced. During the war, influencers have had to adapt to the new reality and their new roles. Being authentic and real means combining the harsh reality of war with polished brand content, making war *consumable*. Despite the tremendous hardships the industry has faced, Ukrainian brands have gained global fame, and some Ukrainian influencers have reached new international audiences (Hawkins & Newbold, 2023). The Ukrainian influencer marketing scene has developed uniquely amid the war by bringing the political and commercial together. In a way, taking a stance during the conflict may have served the business interests of both companies and individual influencers.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore how Ukrainian influencers have participated in the production and projection of strategic narratives and engaged in shaping the nation's collective memory and national identity in a time of war. By analysing Ukrainian influencers' Instagram content and contextualizing it using data collected from an online questionnaire, we showed how the influencers have adapted to the war and adopted new roles through their communication. We identified four specific yet overlapping roles – namely, those of information disseminators, public activists, war diarists, and patriotic inspirers. While engaging with these communicative roles, they have also become mediators of shared affects and strategic narratives. By fusing the visual and affective genres of Instagram with war-related content and strategic narratives, they have constructed a shared past and hopeful future on the mediated battlefield of Instagram. The influencers, thus, have acted not only as narrative intermediaries who have amplified the official narrative of a brave united Ukraine fighting the enemy to convince their followers – locally and globally – of the importance of continuing to support Ukraine, but also as patriotic inspirers who have promoted national romantic imagery among their Ukrainian followers. Furthermore, while showing normal life amid a war that is largely not present in the global mainstream media, the influencers have added a new layer of everydayness to their country's official image – that is, Ukraine is a country at war, but not just a country at war. Social media influencers are, at the same time, ordinary and extraordinary – regular people with a wide or dedicated audience on social media. In today's participatory war, they have been transforming

their professionalism and persuasion skills acquired in marketing into the field of global politics.

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