Article

Refugees' Storytelling Strategies on Digital Media Platforms: How the Russia–Ukraine War Unfolded on TikTok

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Abstract

The article discusses how TikTok has emerged as a platform for self-representation and political contestation during the Russia–Ukraine war. Shortly after the beginning of the conflict, journalists and broadcasters have begun to associate the events unfolding in those countries with the widespread use of this platform among young content creators, refugees, soldiers, and civilians. Described as the "first TikTok war" or as "WarTok," the conflict in Ukraine represents an important example to look at to uncover the increasingly central role of platforms as spaces where conflicts can be witnessed, documented, and shared with global audiences in real time. The research findings illustrate how TikTok becomes a space where material and affective practices of "performed refugeeness" can become visible and viral due to its unique language, formatting style, and highly personalized narratives, while creating a transnational streaming of war-related discourses that not only bypass traditional circuits of news sharing, but also activate a digital care network that crosses borders and connects diverse digital publics. While the study is small scale to account for a more in-depth narrative analysis of TikTok videos, it nevertheless returns significant insights into refugees' digital storytelling strategies in conflict areas.

Keywords

digital care, digital storytelling, performed refugeeness, refugees, TikTok, Ukraine, WarTok

Introduction

Launched as a "special military operation" by Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 24, 2022, with the purpose of "demilitarising and de-Nazifying" Ukraine, the latest invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces is still an ongoing emergency.

According to the latest United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, over 6 million refugees from Ukraine are recorded globally;[1] over 17 million people are still in need of urgent humanitarian assistance inside Ukraine and more than 5 million people are estimated to be displaced inside Ukraine.[2]

Alongside the human costs of the conflict, the reverberating economic and political effects continue to be felt across Europe and beyond, raising concerns about the state of international relationships and the future of Europe as a democratic and humanitarian project, which many journalists and political commentators have now deemed as either destined to fail or in need of critical interventions.

We know, of course, as well that conflicts are now more than ever played out on the communication field, and the war in Ukraine is no exception. Among others, Mohamed Benabid (2022) argues that "the war between Russia and Ukraine unfolds on many theatres, including information and communication. Hybrid strategies and media old and new are utilized for information, persuasion and propaganda" (p. 1). The complexity of this landscape has already been addressed by several scholars who have recently attempted to decipher the political and cultural implications of Benabid's succinct argument. In their Digital News Report 2022, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has discussed how global news organizations have covered the unfolding of this conflict across broadcast, digital, and print media with an unprecedented degree of concern, mainly due to the geographical proximity of the conflict (Newman et al., 2022). Writing for The Wall Street Journal, Sam Schechner and Stacy Meichtry (2022) interrogated how media were used as a political strategy on both sides of the

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conflict: in Russia, to promote positive and empowering news to boost the morale of citizens and soldiers, but also to control the circulation of alternative voices disrupting the maintenance of their power status; in Ukraine, to coordinate acts of protests among citizens against Russian troops, to encourage mobilization within the country, and to call all governments above and beyond Europe to action.

Alongside mainstream media, digital platforms and tech corporations have played a significant role in how events unfolded both within the occupied territories and more globally. Magdalene Karalis (2024) reminds us that the conflict has been described as "the first commercial space war, the first full-scale drone war, and the first AI war" to reflect the extensive use of platforms and technologies on the ground, in the sky, and in the mediatised space of news circulation. This is confirmed in a report by the Atlantic Council, which has recently examined how

> Russian assaults on the Ukrainian information environment are conducted against, and through, largely privately owned infrastructure, and Ukrainian defence in this space is likewise bound up in cooperative efforts with those infrastructure owners and other technology companies providing aid and assistance. (Schroeder & Dack, 2023, p. 2)

While the relationship between public organizations, civil society, and private tech corporations is certainly an area that deserves further investigation, the focus of this article is on another digital space that has emerged during the conflict as a key communicative space, TikTok. Famously described as the "first TikTok war" (Stokel-Walker, 2022) or as "WarTok" (Mobilio, 2022), the situation in Ukraine is the latest example of conflicts that are played out on the ground and on the mediated spaces of digital platforms. Locating itself within the already ample literature on digital media activism, this study recognizes the scarcity of studies on how the uniqueness of TikTok's design and infrastructure makes it a fascinating case study within the migration research field, and focuses on its value as a platform for self-representation and political contestation among young content creators who do not describe themselves as activists but are nevertheless displaying a certain political vocality.

The research argues that TikTok gives creators a space where the material and affective conditions of "performing refugeeness" become visible due to its unique language and formatting style. In livestreaming war-related content through highly personalized feeds, Ukrainian content creators activate a digital care network that crosses borders and connects diverse publics that are *digital*, *affective*, and *intentional*.

Methodology

The study uses a narrative research approach to make sense of refugees' discursive patterns and representations of the conflict on TikTok. According to Baynham and De Fina (2016), the application of narrative analysis allows migration researchers to dig deeper into migrants' convoluted and often challenging processes of uprooting, relocation, and adaptation to new contexts. In allowing scholars to focus on how people make sense of their lives and struggles, narrative analysis—which is often small scale as in this case—provides fascinating insights into migrants' meaning-making practices. For the purposes of this research, the application of narrative analysis to TikTok videos allowed the researcher to extrapolate important data on the lives of young Ukrainians content creators, whose identity and sense of belonging have been profoundly affected by the conflict and around whom research is still scarce.

The data collection was anticipated by a digital walk-through, which allowed the researcher to familiarize with the platform and the variety of content available around the conflict. Following this digital walkthrough, the author decided to adopt not only a narrative lens but also a hashtag-centered approach. This approach, a now common practice within the field of digital research, grounds its validity in the identification of hashtags as "sociotechnical formations that serve social media research not only as criteria in corpus selection but also displaying the complexity of the online engagement" (Omena et al., 2020, p. 1). Beyond their immediate use, which is to gather digital publics' attention around specific conversations, hashtags can reveal attempts at engaging in collective actions (including, as in this case, fundraising for Ukraine), or at creating transnational bonds around certain beliefs and feelings.

The research focused on a small sample of videos that were collected around relevant hashtags, some more popular than others at the time of writing: #ukraine (6.5M posts), #ukrainerefugees (963 posts), #standwithukraine (54.6K posts), #stopwarinukraine (131.1K posts), and #warinukraine (19.6K posts). Per each hashtag, the author focused their attention only on content posted by users who matched the research criteria, that is users identifying themselves as Ukrainian refugees on their TikTok bios or in their videos, purposedly avoiding content posted by news media organizations or non-Ukrainian content creators. Relevant accounts were then isolated and observed to look for similar content until saturation point was reached. A closer ethnographic observation was performed on a total of 10 users' profiles and 112 TikTok videos, the majority uploaded either in English language or with English subtitles.

The analysis of the videos focused on (1) the analysis of emerging stories and communicative patterns in TikTok videos; (2) the form of TikTok, meaning the "design" of the uploaded content such as the choice of music, choice of video format, and choice of footage; and (3) the stance, namely the use of additional nonverbal language including irony and other para-social characteristics (adapted from Gal et al., 2016).

The data collected was then analyzed by means of thematic grouping, namely by identifying common narrative

patterns. This thematic sorting allowed the researcher to differentiate between different types of content production, and to structure them around two key clusters of interest: stories concerned with the practicalities of living under attack and stories concerned with the emotional impact of the conflict.

The use of multiple methods of analysis allowed the researcher to capture the different motivating factors, perceptions, personal stories, and levels of digital engagement playing out on TikTok in a *non-digital-centric* manner (Pink et al., 2016), that is, with a specific focus on the role that digital platforms and spaces play in the everyday life of refugees.

Clearly, the small-scale nature of this work can only allow the researcher to capture specific conversations around the war in Ukraine from the perspective of selected young content creators. A more comprehensive dataset would have uncovered a broader variety of stories, both personal and collective, and potentially returned a more accurate picture of different lived experiences. However, this study was meant to be explorative and to encourage further studies into refugees' identity performances and practices of self-representations on TikTok.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations on the use of TikTok for research purposes are still ongoing and largely based on a case-by-case approach to communities, users, and platform-specific design choices. Finding a balance between the publicness of this platform and the rights of the research subjects is a gray area. Research suggests that the most important challenge faced by researchers is the age of content creators, who are often minors. In their systematic review of existing TikTok studies, Kanthawala et al. (2023) have noted how some researchers have addressed this ethical issue by only using publicly available user data, blurring or deleting any identifying information, and by collecting raw data, such as likes and shares, to avoid disclosing any personal information. While this is certainly a step in the right direction, the authors recognize that problem persists in connection to the handling and publication of such data, however, and in relation to the collection of users' informed consent.

Until recently, asking for users' informed consent was further complicated by TikTok's restrictive contact settings, which limited the opportunity to send direct messages only between accounts that followed each other. In January 2023, however, TikTok has made connections easier by allowing users to opt in to receive direct messages from any registered user (including researchers), rather than only their friends or followers' accounts. Of course, even with users' consent to observe and report on their online content, additional care should be exercised when images (or videos) are involved. Research that explores, shares, and disseminates visual images—including images of protest, war, and deaths as in this case—must take into even more serious account possible expectations of privacy and therefore avoid exposing content that could cause harm. This is especially true because users can delete content at any time, but that content will remain visible (e.g. in the form of screenshots) in publications, and thus potentially accessible by governments, authoritarian institutions, and surveillance forces.

A creative expedient to deal with images and videos in more ethical ways was found in Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar and Asadchy's (2022) research on TikTok use by Latin-American migrants in Spain and in the United States. Adopting an original and innovative approach, the authors had resorted to substituting screenshots from the original videos with illustrations, avoiding any direct citation, link, or direct quoting to the content creators, who often used the platform to document, discuss, and resist sensitive migration-related topic.

Illustrations represent a clever and innovative ethical expedient that more scholars should embed in their work, especially in politically sensitive research (Kaufmann, 2019) and research that investigates emotional states such as grieving and/or trauma (franzke et al., 2020). This study does not use illustrations in lieu of screenshots because illustrations—as useful and ethically sound as they are—flatten out the dynamic performativity that is one of the core arguments I wish to illustrate here around the value of digital storytelling in conflict areas. While I can see their aesthetic value in making stories "alive," I felt they would have not been able to return the very eclectic mix of linguistic and musical patterns that my research has uncovered. As such, I hope my narrative recollection and interpretation will do justice to the stories and people I have encountered online, but no personal information or other identifiable data will be included or mentioned.

TikTok Between the Mundane and the Political

TikTok is a relatively new social media application used to create, share, and watch videos. The platform is owned by Beijing-based company ByteDance, which launched TikTok in September 2017 as the international version of its popular Chinese counterpart Douyin. According to the statistics published in ByteDance's advertising resources, TikTok had 10.55 million users aged 18 and above in Ukraine in early 2022. Data report 31.10 million Internet users in Ukraine in January 2022, with a penetration rate at 71.8% and an increase by 526,000 (+1.7%) between 2021 and 2022 (Kemp, 2022).

TikTok allows users to create short-term music videos featuring special effects, sound, captions, and hashtags among other filters. Born with the goal of spreading creativity and knowledge through "algorithmically-driven experiences" (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, p. 2), TikTok has recently emerged as a platform for cultural and political expression, thus aligning itself with similar social media platforms that have extended their communicative power beyond entertainment, including Facebook and Instagram (Larsson, 2021).

Cervi et al. (2021) among others have observed the centrality of TikTok as a bridge between political parties and (young) citizens, noting the link between TikTok's short video driven language and the increase in politainment content. Sodani and Mendenhall (2021) have investigated the ways in which TikTok can inspire teenagers and young adults to participate in political activities such as activism and voting. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2021) have looked at how young people's political expression takes place and shape across multiple platforms including TikTok, suggesting a close relationship being created between popular culture, political talk, and social media in shaping youth online political expression and visibility. This link is by no means isolated to this platform but suggests, more broadly, that political action and interest now evolve outside of the traditional public arena, as the study will discuss.

Thanks to the platform's participatory nature, actions that would have taken place within the digital walls of other networking sites have found more performative and creative ways of engaging digital publics. Hautea et al. (2021) among others discuss the impact of TikTok videos within climate activism, for example, to understand "how TikTok's affective affordances power digital social activism and the production of publics through highly viewed and shared posts that are heavily influenced by music, mood, and aesthetic" (p.2). The publics that form around mediated conversations are digital, *affective*, as they become "mobilized and connectedor or disconnected through expressions of sentiments" (Paparachissi, 2015, p. 125) and, I argue, *intentional*. Through sharing, commenting, liking, viewing, and re-circulating, the feelings and emotions that propagate on TikTok are meant to keep the public hooked around specific conversations, facilitated as they are by platform's mimetic nature. Compared to other social media networking sites, where pre-existing interpersonal connections constitute the departure point for users to use platforms with their friends and followers first, "user sociality and engagement on TikTok are initially structured around memetic processes, rather than interpersonal connections" argue Zulli and Zulli (2022), meaning that "by not suggesting that users follow friends or readily showing content from a user's connections, networks on TikTok are initially being configured at the content genre rather than interpersonal level" (Ivi, p. 1878).

The relationship between media and activist groups has been the object of numerous studies, which is impossible to fully review here (for a general overview, see Meikle, 2018). Bearing significant similarities with the case under scrutiny here, these studies allow us to ground the present discussion on important precedents of practice. We know that media devices have been, however, praised for their ability to coordinate protests (Cammaerts, 2015), mobilize action (Chen et al., 2021), encourage a sense of collective identity (Khazraee & Novak, 2018), and challenge dominant discourses of power traditionally circulating through traditional media. However, critical accounts of media activism warn us of the dangers

represented by the rise in political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021), the spread of mis- and dis-information (Soares et al., 2023), and circulation of hate speech (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021) on social media platforms.

However, in contrast with previous approaches that mainly focused on users already defining themselves as activists, the reflections I am proposing here are mainly concerned with how young Ukrainian refugees who are not explicitly identifying themselves as activists have resorted to using TikTok as a medium for activating political conversations (support for Ukraine and critique of Putin's war decision) and for establishing a conversational bridge with geographically dispersed publics around empathetic connections with their *performed refugeeness*. The use of TikTok among migrants and refugees is a theme that has not yet received adequate scholarly attention. Some notable exceptions are represented by Maya de Vries' (2021) analysis of TikTok as a tool of Palestinian resistance during the May 2021 fighting in the Gaza Strip, by Daniela Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar and Asadchy (2022), and Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido and Pérez-Rodríguez's (2022) ongoing studies on immigrant TikTokers and by Kaur-Gill's (2023) analysis of TikTok use among migrant construction workers in Singapore.

Similarly to what argued in these studies, my research recognizes that migrants and refugees are highly proficient users of social media platforms for navigational, informational, and connective purposes (Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar, & Asadchy, 2022), and that platforms often act as spaces where they can express, negotiate, and claim their (in) visibility through vernacular content production and distribution (Kaur-Gill, 2023). Similarly to Kaur-Gill's migrant construction workers in Singapore, Ukrainian refugees use TikTok to document, perform, and make visible their precarious situation by creatively mixing and matching the platform's editability features and broader trends. Like Jaramillo-Dent's Latin-American migrants, Ukrainians also exercise their self-governance through means of digital storytelling. However, and in contrast with these communities, Ukrainian refugees do not seem to use TikTok to fight a collective battle such as the lack of integration opportunities for Latin-American migrants in the United States (Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar, & Asadchy, 2022) or the need for better labor advocacy (Kaur-Gill, 2023). While we can certainly argue that TikTok is used to make audiences aware of the effects of the conflict on Ukrainian families and cities, narratives seem slightly more self-centered. This could be because, compared to the groups examined by my colleagues, young content creators from Ukraine are not as politically charged actors. They did not resort to TikTok to start a collective identity claim, they were already on TikTok when the war started, which is why their feeds present a more eclectic mix of content. Their online activity does not seem to produce subaltern knowledge (Kaur-Gill, 2023) or a reversal of power dynamics between the oppressors and the oppressed (de Vries,

2021) which seem to be typical of communities that have historically been marginalized or unvoiced. Their age and lived experiences set my sample apart from existing studies, in relation to which this work only intends to offer additional insights.

By exploring how the platform transforms young content creators into war witnesses and reporters and how the platform's affordances transform the ways in which this kind of content is communicated, this research starts to unpack the narrative, political, and aesthetic value of migrants' digital stories in different but complementary ways. In recognizing the value of storytelling as a significant practice for migrants, one that is often inspired by principles of solidarity, empathy, and agency (Bönisch-Brednich et al., 2023), this study intends to advance our understanding of the role that digital storytelling can have in conflict areas.

Performing Refugeeness on TikTok

Suzuki (2016) defines refugeeness as a site of contestation where what it means to be a "refugee" is object of multiple and multi-nuanced political, cultural, societal and economic configurations. Discourses by refugees, about refugees and on behalf of refugees intertwine and intersect in what is a messy and highly contentious debate, usually politically oriented. According to Szczepanikova (2010), refugeeness is not a static or fixed label characterized by "a set of given psychological or social features" [. . .] but it is instead malleable and "constantly being re-created and performed in social interactions" (p. 473).

In his book *Refugee Voices. Performativity and the Struggle for Recognition*, Rob Sharp (2024) uses the notion of "performative refugeeness" to interrogate how, through different forms of performances, refugees can either revendicate or contest the ways in which they are represented or can represent themselves. This is a reflection point that throughout the years has found itself at the center of controversial debates. Outside of mainstream media, which have been questioned for their mono-sided and politically oriented representations of migrants and refugees, either as victims or as criminals or as mono-sided figures with no affective depth (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019), scholars have interrogated the opportunities that more user-centered platforms provide to individuals for expressing their voice, and whether these could lead to better recognition and participation (Alencar, 2018; Godin & Doná, 2016), albeit within still highly regulated terms and conditions. As a growing social media platform, TikTok is of course no exception when it comes to data policies and regulation. According to a study by Su and Tang (2023), strict data policies exist on this platform in relation to the collection of users' data, the sharing of such data with third-party companies and institutions when required by law, the ownership of such information and finally its storage. Within these highly regulated environments, where the interest of governments and corporations has become quite pervasive, forms of expression that more or less openly debate, contest and resist situations that are politically tense are especially interesting.

Here, I use the notion of *performed refugeeness* to illustrate how TikTok's affordances allow Ukrainian content creators to exercise a certain degree of agency not only over what mainstream media (and Russian-dominated media) say about them, but also over their own perception of becoming a refugee. These are individuals who are experiencing a conflict for their first time in their life but are born within families that have witnessed war before.

Before I present the findings of my ethnographic work, a note on the concept of affordance is due. In Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks (2016), Marie Gillespie together with other scholars use the notion of *affordance* to illustrate "the *communicative and networking* affordances that enabled refugees to connect with and maintain networks, the *locatability* or navigation affordances for wayfaring and finally the *multimediality* affordances that allows for the capture and sharing of images" (p. 31). Technological affordances such as the opportunities offered by mobile phones to connect, activate, and distribute resources, allow refugees to exercise agency in situations of profound despair and neglect for their lives.

The distinction between material and affective discourses made possible by platforms' affordances emerged quite clearly in a previous study I have conducted on Syrian refugees' uses of platforms on their journey to Europe (Marino, 2021). Here, digital connectivity was first analyzed in light of its material "possibility for action," meaning how technologies were used in very practical ways to prepare for the journey, to navigate the geographical and legal spaces of Europe, and to connect to resources upon arrival. Second, the performative and more symbolic dimensions of refugee connectivity were captured in an effort to illustrate their affective affordances, or the potential of different platforms to host emotions like hope, nostalgia, and anxiety.

My research suggests that similar communicational patterns take place on TikTok. On one hand, TikTok seems to be used to illustrate the practicalities of living under attack and the challenges of crossing borders, which I here categorize as *material discourses of performed refugeeness*. On the other hand, many of the videos I have observed are more concerned with the emotional impact of the conflict, including representations of trauma, memories of home from abroad and stories of return (affective discourses). Raw displays of emotions are also evident in those videos that document the political and environmental consequences of the conflict, as they not only provide a close snapshot of bombed areas, but also an intimate outlook into the state of Ukraine pre and post war. The next sections will delve deeper into those.

Material Discourses of *Performed Refugeeness* on TikTok

TikTok's affordances are often exemplified in the form of "design" choices such as the adoption of specific video formats, audio tracks, footage edits and other stylistic choices that the platform allows to convey a given message.

A significant percentage of videos displayed in my sample's feeds uses very popular social media formats such as "A day in the life," "POV" (Point of View), or "GRWM" (Get Ready With Me). These are formats that own their popularity to their seemingly more "authentic," unvarnished, and immediate communicative patterns they deliver, which users and audiences seem increasingly more attracted to as a reaction to heavily edited and staged videos once dominating the social media landscape.

Using captions such as "how Ukrainians refugees live," *A day in the life* videos host different types of narratives that all similarly capture the maintenance of mundanity in war-torn Ukraine. What we see is a close-up into the normality of daily life for young people who still want to enjoy themselves, still want to be outside, and still want to meet with friends. These very intimate and raw portraits of daily life, where we are essentially invited to experience as if we were there, mix with more informative videos shot inside and outside bunkers to report on the state of the country, the presence (or absence) of food from the supermarket shelves, the many manifestations of kindness and support on the streets of Ukraine, but also the downsides of living a fragmented life that can be interrupted at any point when air-raid sirens are heard.

The style of these videos is usually very light even when what we are witnessing is a situation of traumatic adaptation to war conditions. Interestingly, music and audio tracks are not simply added to the story as a random element. Songs become an integral part of the "performance." The rhythm and speed are carefully edited to make sure they add a powerful aesthetic effect to the story being told, either as a way to lighten up an otherwise emotionally stressful content, or to add more depth. Using trending music ensures that the communication stays within the "requirements" of TikTok vernacular language, especially among younger users. Songs such as *Che La Luna* by Louis Prima enforces engagement from the audience thanks to its catchy and viral sound, even though it is used to accompany the story of a young Ukrainian citizen who is showing us what it means to live in a bunker, from cooking to sleeping to working out. Other songs that appeared quite frequently in my sample included Tom Odell's *Another Love*, a song that became the most emblematic hymn of the conflict, being used not only by many Ukrainian citizens around the world to express love for their country, but also by celebrities and organizations during the many events organized in support of Ukraine. Using Primig et al. (2023) concept of "affective audio networks," I contextualize these choices as more or less conscious attempts to minimize the emotional distance at play when hearing/

watching stories about distant sufferers (Chouliaraki, 2006). Affective audio tracks tap on widely known and familiar linguistic conventions that TikTok audiences immediately recognize as familiar, thus facilitating thematic convergence and engagement. While this was not a specific concern for the present research, we could argue that such convergence can in fact facilitate more pro-active forms of involvement such as donating money for Ukraine.

In replicating and imitating popular formats, these narrative strategies embody what Zulli and Zulli (2022) have described as TikTok's "mimesis as the basis of sociality on the site" (p. 1872). The authors argue that the very structure of TikTok operates by following processes of imitation and replication whereby its "sign-up process and default page, icons and features, and user/video norms all illustrate how imitation, and replication, can be encouraged at the platform level" (p. 1877). The facility with which TikTok can be used to live stream events as they happen gives Ukrainian refugees a chance to connect with global audiences in a user-friendly, familiar and viral format, thus allowing users to "experience" the conflict in all its raw cruelty through the eyes of its protagonists. Ludmilla Lupinacci (2021) argues that this infrastructure generates a sense of "unpredictable flow and potential eventfulness" (p. 2) that makes both content creators and viewers almost co-witnesses and spectators. "Through challenge imitation and replication" say Zulli and Zulli (2022), "users can announce 'here I am' to the TikTok world, simultaneously propelling the trend and marking their place in a socio-cultural moment" (p. 1882).

This is what happens especially when specific content is marked under the other popular label of GRWM (*Get Ready With Me*). This trend is usually encapsulated within a hashtag by users who want to show their routine of getting ready for a particular activity or event. By using a popular format that everyone knows on TikTok and on other platforms including Instagram, Ukrainians transform a seemingly banal and aesthetic activity into something more politically powerful and evocative. GRWM is mostly used to show what is in a refugee backpack, or how the protagonists are getting ready to cross borders, or to meet their friends despite the risks of bombings.

The main purpose of GRWM videos is usually "realism" in the form of unedited and uncut representations of bodies and beauty. This type of more mundane content is also available in some of my respondents' feeds, signifying not only a healthy contrast with more war-related content, but also a continuous shuffling of users' preferred content. GRWM videos that focus on bodies and beauty (e.g., skin concerns) seemed to reduce during the height of the conflict, and have increased again more recently, perhaps a sign of adaptation to a reality that does not show signs of arrest, a symbol of youth resilience and need for normality.

Another popular video format on the platform is the POV or *Point of View*. Usually, these are videos where the content focuses on the first-person's perspective, demonstrating

their POV or their opinion about something. POV videos are usually light-hearted and entertaining. Ukrainians use this format to deliver a highly personalized feed of opinions around Russia/Putin's responsibility in the conflict versus their loyalty and respect for Ukraine's President Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelenskyy, the levels of damage that the conflict has brought to Ukraine, and what it means to cross borders in order to seek refuge. The language is usually sarcastic, openly mocking or derogatory, which interestingly seems to suggest a generalized lack of concern over potential censorship or revendications either among the public or from the Russian government.

A significant number of videos deals with the experience of crossing borders, either to document the logistics of moving to another country or to share what it means to live abroad with other European families that have expressed the desire to host Ukrainians fleeing the conflict. In sharing moments of *mundane life abroad*, storytelling strategies that combine "light" visual expedients (music, background effects) and more sarcastic languages are usually privileged. One of the most common snippets of mundane life abroad centers around one of most well-known objects of material culture: food.

More specifically, it is possible to distinguish between videos that either mock or appreciate foreign food and videos where refugees prepare and eat Ukrainian recipes using local ingredients or ingredients found in ethnic supermarkets. Both narratives perform two functions: the first function is to initiate conversations with the locals about their cultural identity: questions about ingredients, recipes, or (strange) food habits are being asked as the camera zooms in and out to let the viewers peek into the new reality refugees are living in. The second function is to perform familiarity. By recreating traditional recipes either in refugee camps or in new European localities, refugees try to maintain a connection with home while at the same time "educating" the viewers to the traditions, habits, and food heritage of Ukraine. This aspect is particularly important, as it somehow points to the fact that content creators are not simply media users and war witnesses, but also—to stretch this argument a bit further—ambassadors of a country torn by the conflict.

Digital mediations of food on TikTok speak about another material affordance that the platform allows to circulate, and that is the aspect of refugee integration.

As I have discussed in a previous article, migrants' construction of a new life abroad is an ongoing negotiation of belongings and attachments to multiple spaces, the space of home and the new space of destination, to which migrants need to adjust. In this process, which can be highly distressing and traumatizing, the maintenance of routines such as eating familiar recipes acts as a stabilizer which equips migrants with a sense of stability (Marino, 2018). As a marker of cultural and personal identity, food supports sense-making and transnational identity dynamics (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010) and sustains migrants' inclusion and self-identification to their new unique positionality (Gvion, 2009).

Integration, as we know it, is never a linear process and demands a unique set of skills of which migrants and refugees are especially proficient at, particularly in terms of adapting to new languages, habits, and routines. The format used to communicate this wide range of experiences varies; as TikTokers take us through the practicalities of becoming a refugee, the tone is often somber, tinted with nostalgia for the life they used to live before the war, and additional hashtags such as #refugeelife and #standwithukraine are used to remark the resilience of Ukrainian citizens. Music—often popular and folk songs from Ukraine—is used strategically to communicate pride for the strength demonstrated by those who stayed behind and by those who crossed the border from the most heavily hit territories. However, other videos seem lighter and more entertaining despite the heaviness of the issues being discussed. Often, captions such as "what has changed since becoming a refugee" are used to describe how refugees adapt to life abroad. Here, the music, the language, the images that are used in videos are more positive and uplifting, or consciously mocking the narratives circulated through other news outlets, for example, on refugees being resettled and given jobs at the expense of locals. Here more clearly, we see how young refugees use the platform to resist and counter-act existing narratives about them, which is an aspect that deserves further attention especially given the widespread view that Ukrainian refugees have been treated much more fairly compared to other populations (Dražanová & Geddes, 2022).

Affective Discourses of *Performed Refugeeness* on TikTok

Many of the videos I have observed serve to document/witness the political and environmental consequences of the conflict. Peters (2001) defines witnessing as a practice that "raises questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying, and the trustworthiness of perception" (p. 707). As a practice, witnessing requires an agent/witness, a text and a receiving audience. In this context, and compared to other forms of war witnessing on, for example, mainstream media, which are usually more static and recording-like representations of a given conflict, users place themselves at the very center of their stories and at the center of their smartphones' cameras. Here, the "embodied performance of eye witnessing" (Andén-Papadopolous, 2014; in Primig et al., 2023, p. 7) becomes viral thanks to TikTok's captive style and language.

In showing fragments of the conflict by "walking around" their hometowns, Ukrainians become witnesses and protagonists of a transnational circuit of *patriotic care* and belonging to a war-torn country. This is epitomized by the fact that traditional music is often used as audio-track, alongside more traditional nationalist symbols such as the Ukrainian flag or the use of a blue and yellow background. Creative content skills are displayed when pictures from pre-war Ukraine are juxtaposed to more recent images to show

viewers different versions of their home country, to invite viewers to visit Ukraine when possible, and to perform rituals of remembrance that intersect with a certain sense of deprived youth, a light-heartedness that was once there. The *affectiveness* of these stories comes through especially when a sense of collective care manages to shine through the trauma of leaving, remembering, and returning home.

Videos that document the trauma of leaving families and friends behind to seek refuge in a neighboring country are especially emotional as they are usually delivered in a particularly raw and crude way. These are usually videos that are uploaded without an audio track; what we hear is families being torn apart, crying, and screaming outside of train stations, bus stops, and fences. In those instances, the tropes of distant suffering (Boltanski, 2009) seem somewhat replaced by a present suffering that happens on screen and to which we can return to every time we click on those videos. Often, these videos are pinned to a user's account and as such immediately visible. The continuous display of trauma potentially allows for a *digital care network* to stay alive and connect different publics together. Public and affective displays of care touch upon the political, cultural, and social consequences of the conflict but also the human suffering especially among the elderly and the children. This is a caring network that is actively substantiated by users' continuous stream of war footages and engagement with their public, by their sapient use of formats and designs that capture attention and invite sympathy, and by the sharing of daily life moments that invite co-existence and solidarity.

It is then perhaps the degree of closeness this platform makes possible that transforms these stories of trauma into something more understandable and more tangible despite the geographical distance of its dispersed publics. Something similar happens in those videos that deal with the trauma of remembering home. These are usually fast-paced videos where tens of images flash one after the other to create suspense and capture audience's attention. Videos of this nature are meant to show to the rest of the world the similarity of Ukraine to any other European country, almost to gather consensus over the damage caused by war, perhaps even to elicit a more open dissensus against Putin's decision to invade this country. Pictures and stories of a pre-war Ukraine mixed with current footages of bombed hometown signal that life is not yet over, that the country can be rebuilt and go back to its original beauty.

A final set of stories that seemed particularly visible across my sample is made of those videos that document return stories. Family reunions are especially evocative and have a similar style to the first category of videos I have illustrated in this chapter, those that speak about the trauma of leaving. Deprived of audio tracks, here as well we tend to hear the voices of those on screen, with the smartphone cameras shifting continuously from close ups to wider shots. Using a framework, I have developed in previous research on migrants' online communicative practices (Marino, 2015), here again I argue that these forms of mediated

documentation and reporting create networks of *digital togetherness*, which I here intend as a specific sense of belonging and identity that is based on sharing very personal and private experiences—such as leaving and reuniting with families—with a community of strangers that somehow become more familiar through a sense of mediated participation, either as spectators or as commentators. In this sense, the online space of TikTok acts as a site of compassion, support, and empowerment that we could only assume can give Ukrainians a sense of comfort when dealing with the horrors and uncertainty of the war. By actively working on creating a highly personalized feed of war-related memories, traumas, and mundane experiences, a connection—however, volatile and fleeting it may be—is created among different publics scattered all around the world. The duration and intensity of this connection are something that only more extensive studies can fully extrapolate.

Conclusion

The research aimed to identify the narrative strategies employed by Ukrainian content creators on TikTok to document their experience of becoming refugees. The research findings have shown that on this platform, Ukrainian refugees exercise their agency not only over what mainstream (and Russian-dominated) media say about them, but also—and more interestingly—over their own perception of what becoming a refugee means in practice. One of the most significant contributions that this explorative study has made to the existing literature is the argument that through the circulation of solidarity narratives in TikTok's vernacular language, refugees seem to exorcize the effects that the conflict has had on their lives.

In creating a transnational streaming of war-related emotional discourses that bypass traditional circuits of news sharing through highly personalized, self-centered and colloquial feeds, Ukrainian citizens and refugees activate a *digital care network* that crosses borders and connects diverse digital affective publics. I argue that these outpours of empathy, which are made possible by the adoption of popular trends and formats such as GRWM or POV that capture audience attention, can reduce the emotional impact of the conflict, notwithstanding the clear traumatic implications of living under constant attack. In other words, by allowing users to share their own individual suffering in uncut and unmediated ways, TikTok seems to offer a temporary relief from the disastrous effects of the war. This is of course only an assumption at this point, based on the observation of the many caring bonds that seem to be developing between refugees and more dispersed affective, cross-border networked publics. While this work was not interested in judging the *quality* or *temporal stability* of these caring bonds, the fact that these can be activated in situations of profound disruption shows the powerful potential that digital spaces hold for migrants' subjectivity and agency, a topic that needs to be investigated in more critical ways. Further research could

investigate the specific conversations that these performances prompt on TikTok, and how interpersonal relationships between users and audiences can develop into concrete actions of support toward people (and places) in need. More research into the ethics of researching TikTok as a platform, space, and communicational ecosystem is also needed, especially when politically sensitive conversations and/or subjects are involved. Finding expedients that safeguard ethical concerns without losing the highly dynamic and lively nature of TikTok's videos is a challenge that many researchers will have to face, but one that bears crucial importance for the future of TikTok studies.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Data from https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine (accessed May 2024).
2. Data from https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/ukraine-emergency (accessed May 2024).

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