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**#We'reLaughingSoWe'reNotGivingUp: The Functions of Digital  
Ukrainian Humor in the First Year of Russia's Full-scale Invasion**  
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**Citation**

Romansky, S. (2023). *#We'reLaughingSoWe'reNotGivingUp: The Functions of Digital Ukrainian Humor in the First Year of Russia's Full-scale Invasion*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



# *#We'reLaughingSoWe'reNotGivingUp*<sup>1</sup>: The Functions of Digital Ukrainian Humor in the First Year of Russia's Full- scale Invasion

Master's Thesis



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Word count: 24000

<sup>1</sup> *Сміємось отже не здаємось*, a Ukrainian-language slogan popularized after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is certainly not the first instance in which humor emerged as a by-product of political turmoil. In times of extreme societal change, people must adapt physically and mentally to survive. Yet, because these adjustments are not immediate, one reaction that can help people acclimate to new circumstances is humor. In answering the research question "*What were the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?*", this thesis finds that coping, cohesion, and criticism have emerged in as humor's primary uses. Specifically, humor functions to create a buffer between old and new realities, define in- and out-groups, and form a medium for commentary. Yet, beyond this, through thematic discourse analysis, the thesis at hand also identifies the sub-categories of humor functions which help explain the means through which humor can meet the stress-relieving, superiority-affirming, or incongruity-resolving needs of groups and individuals in political turmoil. In turn, the thesis reaffirms that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could be labeled a 'TikTok War', as the social media became the primary platform for the sharing of Ukrainian humor. In studying visual data, the research contributes to spotlighting the integral role of images as tools of political influence in the digital age and as artifacts the study of which enhances scholars' holistic understanding of the ramifications of Russia's invasion. With these findings, humor can be appreciated as a highly nuanced and conscious part of Ukrainian resistance and social resilience.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor for her consistent enthusiasm which inspired me to produce the best work possible, as well as her constructive and attentive considerations. I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to experience such a productive and positive collaboration.

My sincere gratitude (*щиро подяка!*) to the SemanticForce team for taking interest in my thesis, for allowing me to use their platform, and for accommodating my requests, without which this thesis would not have been possible.

No amount of 'thank yous' would suffice to express my appreciation for my family, partner, and friends, but I will try. Thank you to my family for encouraging me and reminding me that what I am doing is important. Thank you to my partner for listening to my ramblings about memes, helping me sort out my thoughts, and for always being there. Thank you to my friends for lending an ear or a shoulder when things got difficult and for believing in me.

Finally, I express my infinite respect for the brave and unbreakable Ukrainian people, who find the strength to face the world with smiles and laughter, looking resolutely towards a victorious future.

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## Introduction

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, global audiences have been struck not only by Ukraine's military but also social resilience (Goodwin et al., 2023; Mankoff, 2022). While the war constitutes an existential threat for Ukraine, Ukrainians' sense of national identity and determination to return Ukraine's 1991 territorial borders has only strengthened. In explaining Ukraine's (unexpected)<sup>2</sup> success, research has primarily focused on the differences between Ukraine and Russia's military strategies and capabilities (Mertens et al., 2023; Romansky et al., 2022), the role of leadership (Spector, 2023; Trushevych, 2022) and international support (Bosse, 2022; Lanoszka & Becker, 2023). Yet, despite receiving significant acknowledgement within and outside of Ukraine in the public press (Charles, 2022; Maksymiv, 2022; Semotiuk, 2023) *humor* as a prominent part of the war has remained understudied (spare for Kharchenko, 2022). From the now iconic phrase "[Russian warship go f\\*ck yourself](#)" (The Telegraph, 2022) uttered on the first day of the invasion to the [song tribute to the Turkish Bayraktar drone](#) (Nationalist Songs, 2022), humor is ubiquitous in Ukraine's resistance.

But what role can humor, something seemingly antithetical to the seriousness of war, play in a conflict? Simultaneously, how have the specific dynamics of Russia's invasion shaped the humor emerging from it? These are the central puzzles of the forthcoming thesis, which asks the research question: *What were the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?* While extant research has demonstrated humor's capacity to facilitate coping (Galchinsky, 2016; Üngör & Verkerke, 2015), cohesion (Gal, 2019; Gerlofs, 2022; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014) and criticism (Jakimovska, 2020; Varol, 2014) during political turmoil by creating a buffer between old and new realities, defining in- and out-groups, and forming a medium for commentary, humor has not been studied in a context like Russia's invasion. Specific circumstances make Russia's war unique: a full-scale conflict between a large and smaller power in the time of digital communication technology. While humor in World War I and II has been thoroughly explored (Taylor, 2016; Tholas-Disset & Ritzenhoff, 2015), at the time humor was conveyed through non-digital mediums. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been dubbed a 'TikTok War' for the importance of social and internet technologies in the conflict (Kleisner & Garney, 2022). Conversely, digital humor has been investigated as a byproduct of political turmoil (Gal, 2019; Üngör & Verkerke, 2015; Varol, 2014) but primarily in civil conflicts, which became more prominent than interstate wars since the start of the century (Kaldor, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> When the invasion first began, military analysts did not expect that Ukraine would be able to fight back for as long as it did, moreover gain back occupied territory (Sabbagh, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between 'old' and 'new' wars observes how the means and actors of wars changed in the post-colonial era and specifically following the turn of the century.

Following an iterative method, the forthcoming thesis gives both descriptive and explanatory insights into Ukrainian humor, exploring *why* humor has been used in Ukraine as a specific case. The thesis employs the Ukrainian-made artificial intelligence data visualization platform, SemanticForce,<sup>4</sup> for data collection from social media platforms. Simultaneously, the thesis adheres to constructivist epistemology, holding that the functions of humor can be revealed by examining the recurring sets of meanings which appear in the content and forms of humor through thematic discourse analysis.

In answering the research question, the thesis makes three original contributions. First, while testing the validity of theories on humor responding to political turmoil in application to a new case, the thesis also expands on these theories. Specifically, the thesis deepens researchers' understanding of coping, cohesion, and criticism as functions of humor in political turmoil by discovering sub-categories for each function: the different means through which each effect is ultimately achieved. Thematic discourse analysis as the chosen method facilitated these findings. Second, the thesis adds to the burgeoning body of interdisciplinary international relations (IR) literature which analyzes visual data. Such research is indispensable considering the undeniable role of images as tools of political influence in the digital age (Bleiker, 2019). Finally, this research contributes to scholars' holistic understanding of the ramifications of Russia's invasion as a pressing issue in IR. In doing so, it is emphasized how humor should not be underestimated as a phenomenon which can enhance both theory and policy-based understandings of conflict.

In this thesis, [Chapter 1](#) outlines an interdisciplinary conceptual framework on humor during political turmoil, by defining humor and its theories and reviewing literature which has studied humor in politically tumultuous contexts, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Subsequently, [Chapter 2](#) describes the chosen data collection and analysis methods, as well as corresponding considerations of researcher positionality, validity, and ethics. In [Chapter 3](#), the thesis analyzes the uncovered TikTok and YouTube-based functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion: coping, cohesion, and criticism, and the corresponding functional sub-categories. [Chapter 4](#) concludes the thesis by discussing the findings and reflecting on their implications for experts' understanding of Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression.

## 1 Conceptual Framework

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is certainly not the first instance in which humor emerged as a by-product of political turmoil (Galchinsky, 2016, p. 55). In times of extreme societal change, people must adapt physically and mentally to survive. Yet, because these adjustments are not immediate, humor is one reaction that can help people acclimate to new circumstances. Following the co-application of

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<sup>4</sup> Founded by Ukrainian entrepreneur Vsevolod Gavrilyuk in 2009.

the release, superiority, and, incongruity theories of humor (Gerlofs, 2022; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Üngör & Verkerke, 2015; Varol, 2014) studies have uncovered three primary functions of humor which emerge as individuals and groups respond to political turmoil: coping with stress (Galchinsky, 2016, p. 56), creating cohesion within in-groups or with allied out-groups (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014, p. 300), and/or criticism of oppositionary out-groups (Varol, 2014, p. 577). The study of humor responding to political turmoil is inherently interdisciplinary, combining insights from the fields of psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and IR (Bleiker, 2019).

Humor further manifests in various forms depending on the mediums available for the communication of humor (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 19). Notably, the proliferation of social and internet platforms has significantly increased the ease, speed, and reach of communication (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). Memes have emerged as a form of digital humor, lending themselves especially well to social commentary due to their interactive and visual nature (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021, p. 2369). TikTok as a social media platform has amplified the spread and impact of memes through short-form, viral video content, becoming a platform for both entertainment and information (Newman, 2022). Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, TikTok has been readily employed by the Ukrainian military and civilian populations for tactical and strategic goals (Kleisner & Garney, 2022, p. 9; Romansky et al., 2022, p. 16). Having conceptualized the functions and forms of humor in response to political turmoil, what remains for this thesis is to uncover the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

## 1.1 Definition and Theories of Humor

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is certainly not the first instance in which humor emerged as a by-product of political turmoil. Political turmoil can be understood as instances in which groups experience significant changes to their societal status-quo, because of widespread protests, regime-change, and/or violent conflict (Galchinsky, 2016, p. 55). During World War I, trench newspapers commenting on the absurdity of soldier's conditions helped bolster troop morale (Tholas-Disset & Ritzenhoff, 2015, p. 107). In World War II, British 'blitz humor' parodying Germans spread through radio and postcards (Moorehead, 2019; Taylor, 2016). Focusing on recent cases, Varol (2014) explores the revolutionary humor of the 2011 Arab Spring, the 'Occupy Wallstreet' movement, and 2013 anti-urban development protests in Turkey and protests for free public transport in Brazil. In all cases, humor was used to rally support for causes by satirizing elite classes (p. 557). Even without delving into psychology, one can acknowledge the link between stress and humor as a response. During extreme societal change, people must adapt physically and mentally to survive and persevere. Yet, because these adjustments cannot occur immediately, responding through humor can help people acclimate to new circumstances.



However, beyond this initially self-evident observation, humor, and specifically its role in political turmoil, is more complex. Unfortunately, the study of humor has been perceived as contentious, as some assume that humor ‘dies’ when subjected to rigorous scientific study. By attempting to strictly define, measure, and causally dissect humor,<sup>5</sup> its inherently subjective and social essence risks being lost (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 2). However, by employing a sufficiently broad definition of humor while acknowledging social context,<sup>6</sup> most modern studies easily avoid this pitfall in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods. Having observed this, this thesis follows the holistic definition introduced by Martin & Ford (2018), understanding humor as:

1. *actions and text which are perceived as funny by individuals or evoke laughter,*
2. *the mental processes contributing to creating and perceiving such stimuli, and*
3. *“the emotional response of mirth in [the] enjoyment [of actions and text].” (p. 3)*

Through this definition, humor is conceptualized as an inherently interactive process, from creation to perception and understanding. It requires some reference to others, though not necessarily face-to-face. Humor itself can be found both in the material that is created to be humorous and in the responses to such content. In turn, three dominant theories of humor help explain why humor generally comes about and how it is influenced by context.

First, **release theory** holds that laughter has been evolutionarily hardwired in humans as a biochemical response to combat negative emotions or bodily tension (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 7; Varol, 2014, p. 571). Socially, humor creates beneficial effects for individuals and groups as one’s laughter signals and induces a relaxed state in others. As a result, humor fundamentally evokes positivity (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 8). Because of new stressors and uncertainty emerging from political turmoil, laughter can alleviate feelings of fear and anger while providing energy and a sense of normalcy (Üngör & Verkerke, 2015, p. 84).

Second, **superiority theory** contends that mirth stems from laughter focusing on an out-group’s inferiority. In-groups find the misfortune of outsiders amusing due to its contrast to their actual or perceived supremacy. As such, by laughing at others the experienced status of an in-group can be raised, directly linking humor to identity-based power dynamics and competition (Freud, 1960; Gerlofs, 2022, p. 233). As political turmoil primarily occurs because of inter-group tension, humor can reiterate boundaries and critiques between identities. Socially, humor both strengthens ties within groups and amplifies differences with out-groups (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014, p. 295).

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<sup>5</sup> As was common in psychological statistical studies of the previous century.

<sup>6</sup> As is standard in the study of other communicative phenomena like storytelling (Straßburger, 2022, p. 84).

Finally, **incongruity theory** asserts that when people recognize and resolve the (cognitively) dissonant coexistence of mutually-contradictory or unexpected ideas, humor occurs as a response (Kulka, 2007, p. 321; Straßburger, 2022, p. 88). Laughter is the acknowledgement of the absurdity of a situation where people's expectations of the status-quo were undermined: people laugh because they were caught off guard. When political turmoil disrupts day-to-day life, humor can help process stark contrasts between one's old and new experiences (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014, p. 295).

Although each individual theory supposedly has universal explanatory power, contemporary studies of humor in political turmoil (Gerlofs, 2022; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Üngör & Verkerke, 2015; Varol, 2014) apply them together to account for humor's multifaceted nature (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 3). Specifically, humor's impact on individuals within political turmoil, which often disrupts every aspect of life, cannot be neatly identified as serving purely for release, superiority-affirmation, or incongruity-resolution. Rather, the different experiences of humor can be parallel and mutually-supporting to help a person survive.

## 1.2 Functions of Humor During Political Turmoil

Regardless of a conflict's form and its root causes, when it occurs society is often temporarily or more durably restructured as groups struggle for power. By investigating the content of disagreements between groups, as well as chosen modes of resistance<sup>7</sup> and responses to turmoil, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of a given conflict. In this context, humor is one phenomenon which exposes the insecurities experienced by and motivating groups.

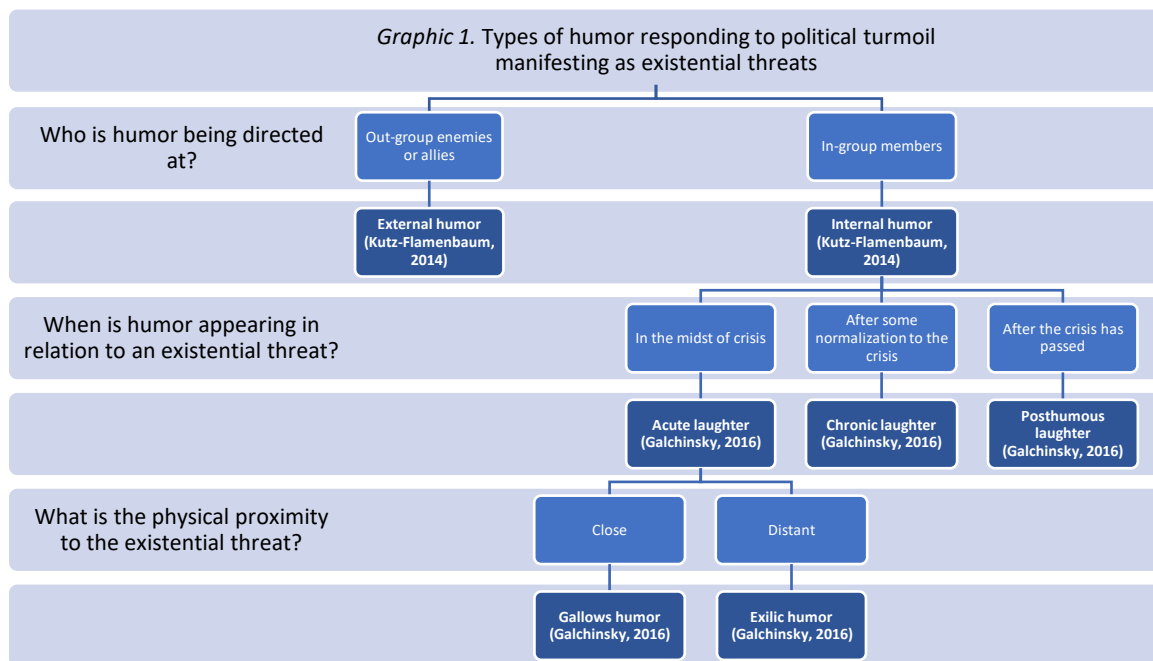
Research on humor responding to political turmoil has explored the correspondence between forms of conflict and types of humor. In nonviolent conflicts, including boycotts, protests, and other forms of non-cooperation (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008, p. 8) humor is commonly employed as a strategy of nonviolent action (Sørensen, 2017) when groups strive to acquire or maintain legitimacy, prevent violent retaliation and/or enlist allies to a particular cause (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008, p. 9). Concurrently, humor also materializes when violent, existential threats, like war or genocide, jeopardize the very identities which allow humor to exist (Üngör & Verkerke, 2015, p. 82). In part, this is because humor is perceived as an inalienable freedom, as one's (physical) ability to laugh can never fully be taken away. Simultaneously, in peacetime and in contrast to dictatorships, humor is seen as a virtue of healthy society, representing tolerance and democracy as part of one's right to free speech (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 12).

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<sup>7</sup> Here, resistance is conceptualized as not reserved for visible, collective acts resulting in social change. Rather, resistance can be individual and group-based, intentional and accidental, and recognized or ignored (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004).

For the case of Ukraine, conceptualizations of humor responding to existential threats are most relevant, as the lives and identities of Ukrainians have been imperiled by Russia's invasion. Galchinsky (2016) identifies three types of humor emerging from groups in response to ongoing existential threats: acute, chronic, and posthumous. **Acute laughter**, found in the midst of crises, is shared amongst victims to gain solace, generate will, and assert defiance and dignity (pp. 55-56). Two types of acute laughter exist: gallows humor and exilic humor. **Gallows humor** is expressed by those in the grip of conflict and in direct risk of death, often focusing on morbid topics as people confront their own vulnerability. This often involves self-deprecating humor: laughter at one's own expense (Varol, 2014, p. 563). By focusing on a group's or individual's humiliation, people's very capacity to be humiliated is emphasized as something that affirms their humanity (Üngör & Verkerke, 2015, p. 82). When recalling their experiences in German extermination camps, Jewish survivors expressed that those who stopped laughing perished more quickly (ibid.). Meanwhile, **exilic humor** is present in those who gain some physical distance from the terror but still empathize with the experiences of those in its midst (Galchinsky, 2016, p. 57). Psychologically, horror frequently arises alongside acute laughter, as the incongruity-resolving triggers and processes underlying humor and horror can be similar, spare for the respectively positive or negative emotions which accompany them (Straßburger, 2022, p. 90). Yet, while horror 'drowns' individuals in their unfortunate reality, humor offers a way of reframing reality, by distraction or its link to positivity (Algorani & Gupta, 2023; Varol, 2014, p. 558). Subsequently, **chronic laughter** occurs following some stabilization in a conflict, aiming to expose the incongruity of turmoil becoming the norm (Galchinsky, 2016, p. 56). Finally, **posthumous laughter** emerges when a conflict ends, serving to lament what was lost (ibid.).

Following Kutz-Flamenbaum (2014), Galchinsky's (2016) conceptualizations would fall under internal humor, which is contrasted with external humor. **Internal humor** is aimed at an in-group, consolidating collective identities and goals, while **external humor** targets outsiders, both for engagement and critique (see *Graphic 1.*).



Depending on its formulation, external humor allows people to laugh with or at others (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014, p. 300; Varol, 2014, p. 577). On one hand, external humor can perform a unifying function with those outside of a given in-group. The surface-level simplicity of humor may make it a convenient entry-point for “a wide range of audiences including fellow protesters, bystanders, and media” (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014, p. 300), creating bonds with allies. If a group’s humor resonates with outsiders it can create a foundation of sympathy, making support and solidarity more likely (Varol, 2014, p. 563). In time, external humor may become internal.

Meanwhile, external humor targeted at members of an out-group can be used both by “the strong and weak for aggressive and defensive purposes, [with] power relations shap[ing] the conception and reception of humor” (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014, p. 296; Speier, 1998). Aggressive humor ‘from above’ (Speier, 1998) aimed at minorities and/or oppressed groups can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and diminish the fundamental respect afforded to said groups, dangerously distorting society-wide perceptions of certain identities (Svatoňová, 2023, p. 11). Yet, humor ‘from below’ can level the playing field with otherwise ‘untouchable’ figures or regimes, allowing groups to ‘attack’ without weapons, simultaneously making violent retaliation disproportionate (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008, p. 9). This way, humor transcends coping for survival and empowers disadvantaged groups and individuals for resistance on a politically conscious level (Varol, 2014, p. 589). In some instances, critiquing humor can take advantage of the shared ‘frames of reference’, ways of understanding the world, of oppositionary groups to make appraisals more poignant. But humor can also have a protective function, as without appropriate frames of reference, those being critiqued might not ‘get it’, thus decreasing the risks associated with critique (Kouper, 2022, p. 157). It remains possible that certain humorous actions are performed without any intended social effect. However,

after observing favorable reactions from audiences, actors integrate initially serendipitous humor into wider resistance strategies. Any study of humor must therefore also account for spontaneity and happenstance (ibid.).

Summarizing these conceptualizations, humor can be understood as having three primary functions which accompany groups' and individuals' responses to political turmoil manifesting as existential threats:

- *Coping - groups and individuals use the resolution of incongruity through humor to process and respond to their new and frightening experiences as well as find stress-release and positivity, increasing their chances of survival.*
- *Cohesion - groups and individuals use humor to highlight the collective nature of their new and frightening experiences, creating and/or strengthening existing social bonds within in-groups and with favorable out-groups which enable mutual support and perseverance.*
- *Criticism – groups and individuals use humor as a vehicle for critique of an oppositionary out-group to empower themselves for resistance on a politically conscious level.*

This thesis aims to uncover whether, how, and why these functions were employed by Ukrainians in response to Russia's invasion.

### 1.3 Forms of Humor

Humor not only serves various functions but manifests in different forms. Martin & Ford (2018) identify four overarching categories. **Performance humor** is staged and broadcast content which is explicitly labeled as humorous (p. 19). This includes comedy shows, plays, and stand-up routines. **Jokes** are 'canned' content involving a set-up and a punchline introducing a twist, primarily relying on humor based on the resolution of incongruity (p. 20). **Spontaneous humor** includes wordplay, puns, and wit which emerge 'on-the-spot' based on contextual confluence (p. 21). This form of humor often appears in conversations between individuals. Finally, **unintentional humor** appears in the form of "accidental physical and linguistic humor" (p. 23). These distinctions demonstrate that humor can be intentional and unintentional, depending on interactions between the source and audience. Additionally, one form of humor can be embedded within others. For example, both unintentional slapstick humor and jokes can be scripted into a performance.

Simultaneously, humor's forms depend on the mediums available. The proliferation of social and internet platforms has significantly increased the ease, speed, and reach of communication (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). Within the internet domain, humor has evolved to reflect this new environment, most notably with the emergence of memes. Memes are ephemeral canned picture-and-text content which can be replicated and remixed by individuals and spread through mass-dissemination (Hamilton, 2016, p. 163). Memes represent trends that require collective participation and build on elements of culture with variable context and content (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021, p. 2367). Due to the self-referencing nature of memes and their short lifespan, memes necessitate a high degree of intertextual awareness (Breakwell et al., 2020, p. 290) to be understood, granting them the potential to bring people together and filter outsiders based on 'inside jokes' and shared preferences on an unprecedented scale (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021, p. 2371). Due to their inherently interactive nature, memes are frequently used as vehicles for social commentary and the creation of social norms, bringing or diverting attention to specific topics through satire and parody (p. 2369). However, the mass-production of memes also risks diluting and distorting the original messages embedded within them. Meanwhile, some memes have emerged to be purely absurd (see *Image 1.*), with their humor being based on the extent to which the meme itself is incongruent with reality (Pallawarukka, 2022, p. 6).

These facets of memes are complicated by their visual nature. Static and video memes are 'read' differently than verbal or written humor. Static memes lack the sequential introduction of a set-up followed by a punchline, as all information contained in a visual is perceived simultaneously (Bleiker, 2015, p. 885). Furthermore, while chronology is preserved in video memes, images are generally considered to "evoke, appeal to, and generate emotions" (p. 876) in more direct ways than text as they correspond to how people usually perceive reality. With the inclusion of audio and movement, videos especially approximate the experience of being at the site of recording, adding to relatability through verisimilitude. In IR, images therefore can be more shocking and impactful, harder to ignore both for their content but also for the normative expectations that individuals should respond to images in certain ways (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020, p. 76). The recognized power of visual content to convey and frame reality therefore also inclines people to be cautious of content authenticity, as, for example,



*Image 1.* Absurd meme which was widespread online in 2018, featuring a photo edit of the character Lord Farquaad from Shrek and YouTuber Markiplier captioned 'E' (Know Your Meme, 2018)

artificially generated video 'deep fakes' can manipulate audiences into believing untrue representations of individuals or groups (De Ruiter, 2021, p. 1312).

The immediate and visual nature of information-consumption which occurs through memes has an impact on how people interact with them. Compared to other forms of humor, memes are 'faster', both because of how they are spread but also because of how visual intertextual references make them easier to 'get' if one is sufficiently attuned to present and past internet trends (Bleiker, 2015, p. 884; Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021, p. 2367). In turn, once a person is 'in' on a joke there is a motivation or even pressure to remain so, lest one risks becoming an 'out of touch' outsider. The algorithmic nature of social media platforms on which memes primarily proliferate exacerbates this compulsion by presenting evermore personalized content to (groups of) individuals (Deibert, 2019, p. 29). Currently, much of the debate about 'exploitative algorithms' focuses on the social media platform TikTok. TikTok hosts primarily short-form video content, with overlaid text and either music or voice-over audios. On the platform, trends or memes dominate the algorithm, as memes encourage individual participation, both so that users spend more time on the platform and so content creators gain views. For some groups, notably Generation Z,<sup>8</sup> TikTok is becoming an information outlet alongside an entertainment platform. By condensing news into attention-grabbing snippets which boil down only the most essential facts, information has been made easier to consume (Newman, 2022). While this allows people to, overall, be more aware of global events, algorithms also risks filtering out certain information and facilitating the consumption of disinformation, as there are few incentives for people to look beyond social media to fact-check (ibid.). Specifically, social media can exacerbate identity-based echo chambers and polarization by catering to people's existing biases through targeted content (Deibert, 2019).

Within this context, the war in Ukraine has been dubbed the first 'TikTok War,' for the role that TikTok has played in both social and military spheres. Ukrainian Armed Forces have integrated TikTok into their information operations, with individual companies using the platform to share updates on their progress and status in the battlefield, maximizing transparency (Kleisner & Garney, 2022, p. 9). While there is an inherent risk in exposing one's location this way, by geotagging posts soldiers could also use their posts to counteract Russian claims to given territories (Romansky et al., 2022, p. 27). Social media has become directly embedded in combat, with humor conveyed through social media forming a part of soldiers' battlefield experiences.

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<sup>8</sup> "[T]he generation born during the late 90s to early 2010s (1999-2010)" (Pallawarukka, 2022, p. 1).

## 1.4 Humor Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Humor responding to political turmoil has become an observed, but not yet comprehensively studied, phenomenon following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. 2022 marked the return of traditional high-intensity warfare to the European continent, dissolving the assumption that economic interdependence with Russia could deter conflict (Bosse, 2022, p. 533). Russia's invasion also broke the trend of most modern wars manifesting as civil conflicts (Kaldor, 2013). Yet, one must recall that Ukraine has been subject to Russification – the erasure of Ukrainian culture, language, and national identity – for centuries. The Russian narrative relies on the belief in the illegitimacy of a separate Ukrainian identity; Russia's and Ukraine's future are necessarily interwoven. Any Ukrainian attempts to move away from Russia are seen as resulting from Western meddling that tries to weaken Russia by 'taking away' Ukraine (Mankoff, 2022). Concurrently, active fighting between Ukraine and Russian separatists has continued since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Therefore, prior to the 2022 invasion, Ukrainians already developed a deep sense of existential threat from Russia.

The value of humor for Ukrainians is difficult to discern without understanding the history of Ukraine's conflict with Russia, and the cultural distinctions between the nations. A study of humor styles across 28 countries revealed that Ukraine had one of the lowest means for self-defeating humor, meaning that self-deprecation was not found to be part of Ukraine's humor-culture (Schermer et al., 2019, p. 6). In fact, Ukraine lead in self-enhancing humor styles (p. 14), making it unsurprising that humor has been and continues to be used to affirm Ukraine's dignity (Gudzenko, 2014). A handful of studies (Gudzenko, 2014; Kyiak, 2017; Wiggins, 2016) have researched humor in response to Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories in 2014, finding that "horizontally structured civil society provided such functions of humor as solidarity (belongingness) and stress-relief" (Kyiak, 2017, p. 123), or what this thesis would consider cohesion and coping. Specifically, humor functioned to combat Russian disinformation as there was no Ukraine-wide counter-propaganda campaign. Humor emerged as one way that people could independently and spontaneously face changes and threats to their existence (ibid.). While it is likely that this thesis will find that humor post Russia's 2022 invasion holds similar cohesive and coping functions, the context is different as experiences of political turmoil became more tangible nationwide following a full-scale invasion.

Recent studies in the field of psychology have found that Ukrainians experienced high rates of psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia since the start of Russia's invasion (Xu et al., 2023, p. 6). Yet, Ukrainians also adopted positive coping strategies to deal with psychological anguish. Ukrainians relied on mutual support to cope with anxiety, and active planning and distraction to cope with stress (p. 7). Ukrainian teenagers found solace in political participation through protests and information-sharing on social media (Lopatovska et al., 2022, p. 666). Most relevant for this thesis, emotion-focused coping strategies, including humor, were "unrelated to psychological symptoms for



Ukrainians in the initial stage of the war” (Xu et al., 2023, p. 7). The researchers speculate that this is because “the terrible situation of a war may simply make it hard for people to make jokes or fun of the situation” (Xu et al., 2023, p. 7). Reflecting on the functions of humor in political turmoil it is therefore necessary to note *when* humor develops positive effects.

As a whole, the responses to fighting in Ukraine have been significantly impacted by social and information technologies. As social media greatly enhances the reach and accessibility of messaging, any one Ukrainian was able to contribute to the war effort. Soldiers have been implementing social media-based tactics to change the enemy’s battlefield perceptions (Romansky et al., 2022, p. 16). On a societal level, myths and legends were used by the Ukrainian government to boost morale inside Ukraine and garner support from allies (p. 9). Humor is an integral part of this information environment. As revealed by the handful of articles and studies on humor in the war, most Ukrainian humorous content has either been meme-ified or ended up as memes, as the speed of their transmission and flexibility of content presentation lends itself well to the function of society-wide resistance (Antoniuk, 2022; Kharchenko, 2022; Maksymiv, 2022). Notably, Kharchenko (2022) finds that Ukrainian journalistic multimedia employed superiority-affirmation and incongruity-resolution as part of humorous storytelling to enhance the reach and appeal of news items.

Having established the definition, theories, functions, and forms of humor in the context of political turmoil, what remains for this thesis is to uncover the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

## 2 Research Design

Having established the conceptual framework for the functions of humor responding to political turmoil in [Chapter 1](#), [Chapter 2](#) outlines the thesis’ research design. First, the formulation of the research question is elaborated. Second, the data collection method is introduced, where through SemanticForce, a Ukrainian-made artificial intelligence data visualization platform, a sample of 61 humorous posts was drawn. The peculiarities of analyzing social media content are also explained. Subsequently, thematic discourse analysis is presented as the thesis’ data analysis method. Emphasis is placed on the analysis’ iterative nature, to reflect the intertextual and mutually constituting nature of the humorous artifacts. Finally, the researcher discloses considerations of positionality, validity, and ethics.

### 2.1 Research Question

The conceptual framework established in [Chapter 1](#) informs the formulation of the research question: *What were the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine?*

The term 'function' is understood as embedding two sub-questions in the research question:

1. *Why was digital Ukrainian humor used in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion?*
2. *How was digital Ukrainian humor used in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion?*

Answering these questions will require an investigation into, respectively, what needs were being met by humor and which particular forms and content of humor helped meet these needs. As such, the thesis' findings will be inherently process oriented, as per the established definition of humor ([1.1](#)).

Beyond this, the study of Ukrainian humor in response to the new reality of high-intensity warfare will likely deal primarily with acute laughter, used by victims amid crisis for solace and defiance (Galchinsky, 2016, p. 55). To focus the thesis on these responses is it useful to limit the research question to "*the first year of full-scale war*". However, this does not preclude that chronic and/or posthumous laughter, lamenting the past, could be encountered (p. 56). Given Ukraine's experiences of Russian imperialism and ramping conflict in eastern Ukraine, chronic and/or posthumous humor (Kyiak, 2017) may be referenced by new content.

The research question focuses on "*Ukrainian humor*" as the product of an in-group, in primarily Ukrainian but also in Russian (Kharchenko, 2022, p. 350). While there has been a radical shift of Ukrainians switching to speaking exclusively Ukrainian in 2022, to combat Russian imperialist justifications for invasion, Russian speaking populations remain (Mankoff, 2022). Simultaneously, Russian may be used when humor is directed at Russians specifically. Ukrainian humor therefore includes both internal humor, targeted at Ukrainians, and external humor (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014, p. 295) targeted at outsiders, both enemies (Russians) and allies (EU/NATO-member states).

Finally, the thesis also focuses on different forms of humor (Martin & Ford, 2018, pp. 19–22) within a *digital* context. While Ukrainian humor in response to Russia's invasion has been conveyed through centralized and traditional mediums like television or journalistic media (Kharchenko, 2022), a focus on digital humor is the most direct way to investigate the creation and consumption of humor by individuals. In turn, this provides insights into how and why humor has been used by a population as a whole.<sup>9</sup> This is specifically due to the ease of accessibility offered by social media, as individuals become part of collective resistance.

## 2.2 Data Collection

To analyze the humorous content produced on social media platforms, this thesis employs the Ukrainian-made artificial intelligence data visualization platform, SemanticForce, for data collection. SemanticForce was founded by Vsevolod Gavrilyuk in 2009 to help organizations and individuals to gain comprehensive overviews of "news, social media, reviews, messengers, pricing, ads and threats

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<sup>9</sup> While not the focus of this thesis, this approach could be compared to digital ethnography.

intelligence” (SemanticForce, 2023). By synthesizing trends through an accessible user interface, SemanticForce can track content with an almost internet-wide scope. Upon request of the researcher, access was granted to SemanticForce by Mr. Gavrilyuk and his team from January-May 2023. Accessing SemanticForce was especially beneficial as it can process and gain access to more content than would be possible with manual data collection. The removal of human selection bias also contributes to objectivity and generalizability to the specific types of posts analyzed by SemanticForce. Simultaneously, SemanticForce is already attuned to Ukrainian-language searches, ensuring that cyrillic script input would be processed correctly.

Searches through SemanticForce require keyword and pre-installed filter inputs. To draw a sample of humor content, a search query was created starting with the Ukrainian word for ‘humor’ (гумор in Ukrainian), humor-related Ukrainian and Russian nouns and verbs, and humor-related slogans which emerged post Russia’s invasion that the researcher and Mr. Gavrilyuk’s team had identified (see [Appendix 1a](#)). Both Ukrainian and Russian words were included in the search query (Mankoff, 2022). To further narrow the search, SemanticForce filters were toggled to delimit a time-frame (24/02/2022-24/02/2023) matching the period of one year in the research question, prioritize content mentioning “гумор” as the main identifying of ‘Ukrainian humor’, and sorted by engagement. Engagement is a cumulative metric on SemanticForce of how many times a post was viewed, liked, or commented on. Subsequently, SemanticForce displays a collection of individual social media posts which match the research question specifications. Each post constitutes one unit of analysis as an ‘artifact’ of humor. To narrow case selection, only quantitatively ‘viral’ posts with more than 500,000 views (metric for viralness determined by Bauckhage et al., 2015, p. 25) were considered valid for the study. ‘Viralness’ testifies to the reach and potential impact of humor-content (ibid.), as posts would not spread so far without resonating with many individuals.

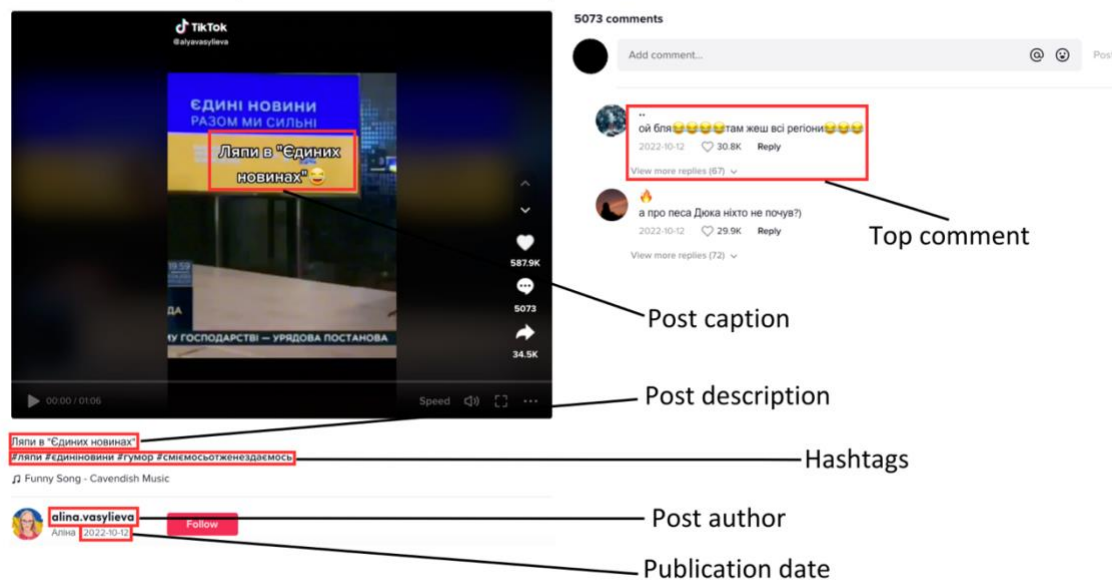
For each post, the researcher recorded the identified platform, post link, and view, like, and comment count (at the time of sampling) presented by SemanticForce (see *Graphic 2*).

*Graphic 2.* Elements of SemanticForce search query results recorded for data collection



After following the link to individual posts, the publication date, description of the post content (based on the caption, post description, and hashtags), author, description of author’s general content, and finally the author’s follower count was also noted (see *Graphic 3*). For each post the researcher provided literal translations for the Ukrainian language content and, when necessary, meaning-oriented translations relaying the ways in which text could be understood.

*Graphic 3*. Elements of TikTok post recorded for data collection



The SemanticForce search terms were updated iteratively after a point of meaning-saturation was reached, where saturation means that no new information was drawn from each consecutive post (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, p. 166). Specifically, patriotic, Ukraine-specific, hashtags which were frequently found alongside the original set of hashtags were added to refine the search and verify whether any content was missed (see [Appendix 1b](#)). In itself the prevalence of patriotic hashtags revealed the consciously political nature of humorous content, which will be further discussed in the analysis. Saturation was determined based on several factors. First, when individual accounts which consistently focused on the same themes were repeatedly encountered in the sample, the content of those posts was no longer sampled. Second, a distinction was made between complex and supplementary posts. Complex posts were those posts which alluded to several themes and had multiple layers of intertextuality that needed to be accounted for. Because of how much these individual posts revealed about the functions of Ukrainian humor, they were prioritized in the sampling over others. More ‘simple’ posts were still included in the sample to reaffirm the validity of the findings. At the end of data collection, a total of 61 social media posts (four YouTube videos and 57 TikToks) were sampled through SemanticForce.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

The thesis at hand is rooted in social constructivist epistemology, where language is understood as the means through which people shape social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Humor, as a communicative phenomenon, impacts people's interpretations of and interactions with social reality, including war. To study the functions of humor responding to political turmoil, this thesis employs thematic discourse analysis (Breakwell et al., 2020) to identify themes, or overarching sets of meanings (p. 290). This is combined with Gee's (2010) discourse analysis tools which facilitate the systematic reconstruction of text, from conception to formulation and interpretation, to approximate understanding of communication from an 'insider' perspective (p. 19). Qualitative discourse analysis acknowledges how any one piece of communication can have multiple, even conflicting yet equally legitimate, interpretations despite an intended meaning by the creator. By focusing on both themes within meaning and meaning-making, this thesis can account for the plural functions of any one humor artifact. The process of recreating meaning is iterative: understanding of one text is improved by the understanding of others. Therefore, the thesis follows an abductive logic of inquiry, which can answer 'why' questions by focusing on the description and interpretation of meanings and intentions (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, p. 118). Ultimately, the thesis will be able to argue how and why specific humor artifacts were used by Ukrainians.

The starting point for the exploration of themes was informed by the conceptual framework. The highest-order themes became the pre-identified functions of humor responding to political turmoil: coping, cohesion, and criticism. For each artifact, Gee's (2010) 'tools' were employed to help the researcher ask the correct questions to trace the intentions and interpretations contributing to meaning-making and function. According to Gee, to analyze meaning-making within specific contexts the most useful tools are:

- *'The Fill In and Making Strange Tools,'* which requires researchers to consider what information was not explicitly stated in a message and therefore needs to be inferred from context or intertextuality for information to be communicated (p. 12)
- *'The Intonation Too, I'* which requires researchers to assess how a voicer's tone affects how a message could be received. This includes syntax, capitalization and, specifically in a digital context, emojis (p. 28)
- *'The This Way and Not That Way Tool,'* urges researchers to weigh why a message was constructed using specific word choice and syntax (p. 62).

Each sampled post was analyzed hermeneutically: both as a comprehensive whole in itself and a part of a greater intertextual narrative (Breakwell et al., 2020, p. 290). First, a post was broken down into individual components (see *Graphic 3*). After recording the relevant information outlined in [2.2](#) (see [Appendix 2](#). Columns 'Date', 'Platform', 'Engagement', 'Link'), the researcher watched the post

several times and noted the literal translation of the post caption, description, and hashtags. The researcher also noted direct descriptions of the visuals and audio in the video (see [Appendix 2](#). Column ‘Observations’). Top comments (see *Graphic 3*.) were referenced to gain insight into audience’s interpretations of posts’ messages. Subsequently, the researcher followed Gee’s tools to derive explicit and implicit meanings conveyed in a post by looking at the syntax, grammar, denotation/connotation of all its elements (Gee, 2010, p. 2). The visual and audio components, such as music lyrics and beat, or imagery and camera-framing, were considered for their contribution to themes, tone, mood along with the caption, description, and hashtags.

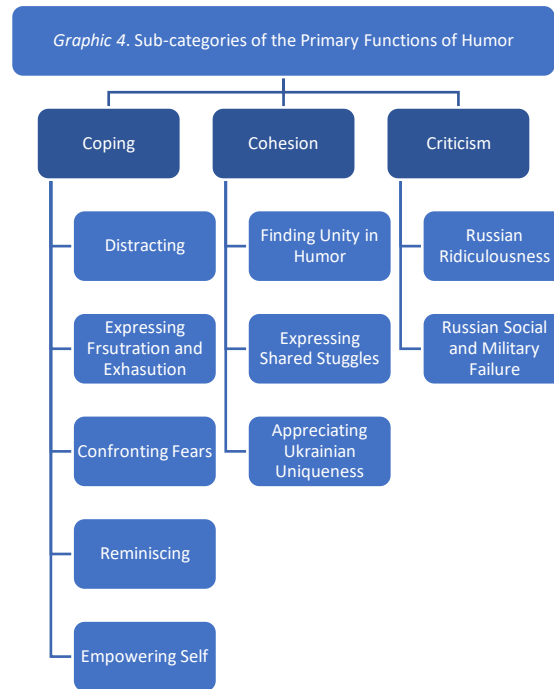
The researcher subsequently coded the observations for the presence of three overarching categories ‘coping’, ‘cohesion’, ‘criticism’. [Appendix 2](#). features one row of the data analysis table, demonstrating how the most popular TikTok in the sample was analyzed. The video features a compilation of bloopers from the Ukrainian United News telethon which was started in response to Russia’s invasion. After making mistakes during broadcasts, some news reporters laughed or swore at their errors, which was interpreted as conveying recognition of their own unintentional humor (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 23). Additionally, the compilation of bloopers was shared with *#humor*, implying the post author’s recognition of humor as well. Here, humor arises from the incongruity between the important responsibility of news reporters to keep Ukrainians up to date with the developments of a life-threatening war, and their simple mistakes and inappropriate behavior. All top comments on the post repeated their favorite blooper from compilation, conveying the viewer’s amusement at the relatability of the experience. As such, the video was seen to function for coping, as laughter releases the embarrassment of making mistakes in a serious context, and cohesion, as Ukrainians found the content relatable. For this and other posts, additional research aided in informing the references being made and the social context (what events occurred when content was created).

Of the 61 sampled posts, most posts simultaneously fulfilled coping and cohesive functions through humor (see *Table 1*.). This was primarily due to the observation that while some humorous content was not directly related to the war, the content-creators still showed an awareness of humor as a valuable element for the consolidation of Ukrainian identity through hashtags.

**Table 1.** Number of sampled posts in each (combination of) core function(s)

Core function(s)	Coping	Cohesion	Criticism	Coping + Cohesion	Cohesion + Criticism	Criticism + Coping	All three
Number of sampled posts	15	2	7	33	2	2	-

Afterwards, lower-level codes were derived by comparing *how* all humor artifacts achieved coping, cohesive, or critiquing functions of humor. While two posts could both serve a cohesive function of humor, their content could be radically different. Therefore, by identifying the themes between posts performing the same function, further insight into why and how said function was used could be achieved. In consolidating the recurring themes in the humorous artifacts, ten sub-themes were found (see *Graphic 4.*). Humor which provided a distraction, helped confront fears, express frustration and exhaustion, reminisce, and empower oneself was found to help Ukrainians process their new reality, and as such serve primarily a coping function. Meanwhile, humor which emphasized unity emerging from humor, shared struggles, or appreciation of Ukraine’s unique identity contributed more to cohesion. Finally, humor focusing on satirizing Russian culture, as well as Russia’s social and military failures since the invasion served to critique the enemy. By identifying lower-level themes, the means through which cohesion, coping, and/or criticism were conveyed could be elucidated, as well as the often-plural interactions between the three core functions.



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## 2.4 Positionality

The researcher’s Ukrainian identity and personal experience with post-invasion humor help ensure that socio-historical and linguistic/literary nuances of the humor artifacts are respected. While the researcher comes from a Russian-speaking Ukrainian family, they possess a proficient level of the Ukrainian and English languages. As such, the researcher feels competent in providing accurate translations. In instances where translation proved difficult, such as for untranslatable concepts or military terms, the researcher consulted Google Translate. The researcher also grew up within a Ukrainian culture at home, consuming Ukrainian early 2000s (humor) media. This upbringing aids the researcher in grasping intertextual references. Finally, at the start of Russia’s invasion, the researcher personally consumed humorous Ukrainian language content on social media. This gives the researcher pre-existing familiarity with individual pieces of content analyzed, as they emerged in a non-sample-based environment. These aspects lend themselves to the researcher’s confidence in being able to authentically reflect on Ukrainian humor. Meanwhile, the researcher’s American and Dutch

nationalities, and prior research on the information environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see Romansky et al., 2022) place them in the position to translate from a Ukrainian to Western perspective, and give distance to prevent biased readings.

The choice of working with SemanticForce is motivated by the platform's attunement to Ukrainian-language content and its ability to process and gain access to more content than would be possible with manual data collection without selection bias. Access to SemanticForce was gained through a personal acquaintance, who was using SemanticForce for sentiment analysis. In turn, the acquaintance placed the researcher in contact with Mr. Gavrilyuk. The thesis would not be possible in its current form without the researcher's personal network. However, SemanticForce demos are available upon request for research purposes.

## 2.5 Validity

The thesis' main validity-challenge is external: whether the thesis' findings will be generalizable to all post-invasion Ukrainian humor. Because the present data collection is rooted in a text-based query, certain content without traceable text, will have been automatically excluded from the sample, despite potentially otherwise fitting the search criteria. However, content shared on social media with hashtags is intended to be discoverable through hashtag-based algorithms. Paying attention to 'viral' pieces ensures that individual posts studied will have resonated with a lot of people, and be more representative of general humor trends. Additionally, if new relevant hashtags were discovered, they were added to refine the query. A limitation of SemanticForce is that it cannot identify 'where' a post became viral, making it unclear to what extent humor was internal or external (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). However, by using Ukrainian-language humor as the anchor and looking at comments, this weakness can be mitigated. Finally, it is important to note the consistently changing engagement metrics of posts. Some posts could have become more popular compared to others from the time of sampling to when the analysis was written. This drawback was remedied by limiting time frame. Furthermore, by acknowledging that the posts were popular at the point of sampling means that they still provide insight into Ukrainian humor.

## 2.6 Ethical Considerations

The researcher has elected to censor crude or expletive language to protect readers and maintain the academic tone. However, because such language is a genuine component of humor, no information has been excluded for being vulgar or offensive.

As the content included within this research has been posted publicly, the researcher has not censored or otherwise obscured the usernames of the content creators. When discussing particular posts, the researcher provided corresponding hyperlinks.



The researcher declares that, despite the personal impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this thesis holds no conflict of interest. The researcher is committed to engaging transparently and honestly throughout every step of the research, having chosen data collection and analysis methods to give valid and relevant insight into Ukrainian resistance.

### 3 Functions of Humor

The thematic discourse analysis of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year following Russia's invasion revealed that all three primary functions of humor (coping, cohesion and criticism) were used to varying degrees by Ukrainians in response to political turmoil. Humor used for coping was most prevalent and diverse among the sampled posts. Yet, almost all humorous posts contained some cohesive themes, whether explicitly in the humor itself or in the presentation of humor, such as in the post descriptions or hashtags. The underlying presence of cohesive themes in humor, most prominently finding unity in Ukrainian humor itself, represents Ukrainians' awareness of humor's potential to enhance in-group relations, overall being used to consolidate Ukraine's national identity and independence.

No eligible posts were sampled from the first three months of Russia's invasion (February, March, and April). Yet, as the conflict continued the amount of posts sampled from every month increased, peaking in November 2022. This observation does not indicate that humor was not used for coping by individuals or groups from the very beginning of Russia's invasion. Rather, the use of humor in response to political turmoil became more widespread in the second half of the year. Simultaneously, the subjects of humor changed as the war continued. Humor came to reflect people's specific experiences and needs. Some of the posts further made references to each other, possessing a high level of intertextuality.

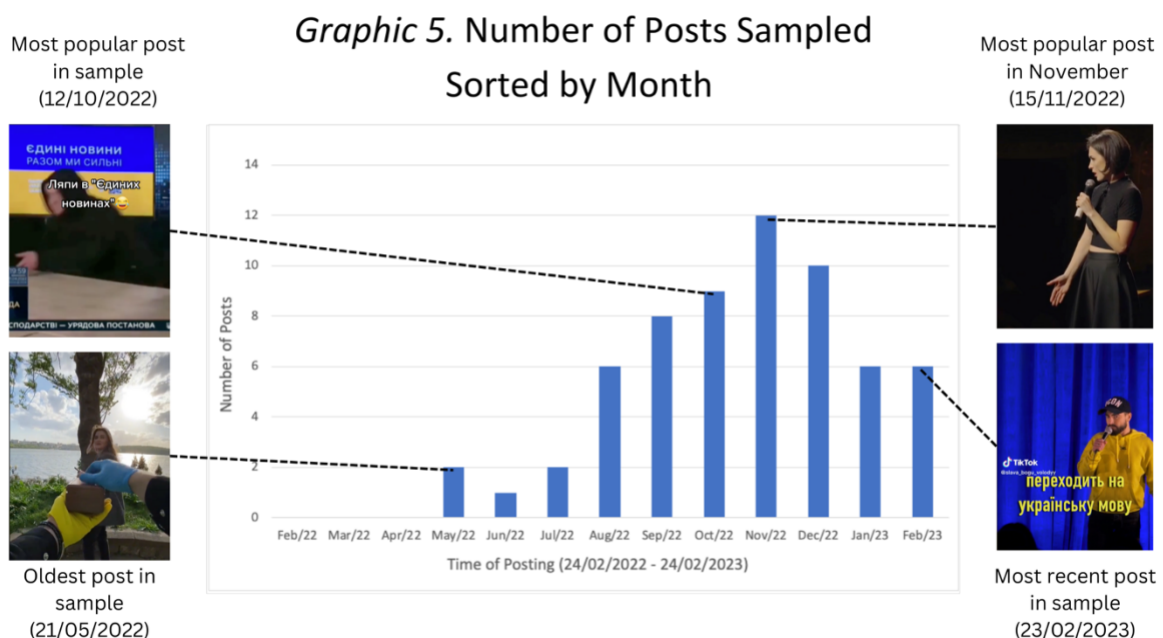
[3.1](#) begins by describing the sample, drawing key observations prior to conducting thematic discourse analysis. The section continues by analyzing the themes uncovered in the posts following the three primary functions of humor: coping ([3.2](#)), cohesion ([3.3](#)), and criticism ([3.4](#)). For each function, the most prevalent sub-categories are outlined to guide the analysis as to the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the year following Russia's invasion.

#### 3.1 Descriptive Data

At the end of data collection, the thesis sampled 61 social media posts through SemanticForce. The sample included four YouTube videos, while all other posts (57) were TikToks. The post in the sample with the highest engagement was a [TikTok](#) (alina.vasylieva, 2022) which compiled bloopers from the Ukrainian United News telethon. The telethon was started by Ukrainian TV stations following Russia's invasion to enhance their combined ability to keep the Ukrainian population up-to-date on

war developments. The TikTok features different instances in which news reporters were caught ‘messaging up’. Since the post was made in October of 2022, it amassed 6.3 million views, 588.1 thousand likes, and 5.3 thousand comments. The post with the lowest engagement in the sample was a [TikTok](#) (youngteacher91, 2022a) with 536.7 thousand views, featuring a skit of a teacher leaving class as one of the students asks why in comparison to other teachers he gives so little homework. The teacher subsequently lip-syncs to an audio overlay which makes it seem like he is saying “You need to live instead of doing useless sh\*t”.

No posts sampled following the specific criteria, digitally shared content between 24/02/2022 and 24/02/2023 with at least 500,000 views, were from the first three months following Russia’s invasion i.e. there were no posts in the sample from February, March, or April 2022 (see *Graphic 5*). The majority of sampled posts were posted in autumn of 2022, with the top overall month for posts being November 2022 (see *Graphic 5*). The earliest post in the sample was a [TikTok](#) (brany\_official, 2022) prank video posted on 21/05/2022. Since being posted, the TikTok gained 3.5 million views, 293 thousand likes, and 1.1 thousand comments. The newest post in the sample was a [TikTok](#) (slava\_bogu\_volodyy, 2023) posted on 23/02/2023. At the time of sampling, the post had 1.8 million views, 172 thousand likes, and 1.8 thousand comments. The TikTok was an excerpt from a comedian’s stand-up routine in which he comments on the struggle that ‘Surzhyk’ speakers, those who speak a mix of Ukrainian and Russian, have been facing in Ukraine since the start of Russia’s invasion.



Even this short description of notable sampled posts demonstrates the diversity of digital humorous content since the start of Russia’s invasion. While these descriptions do not in themselves indicate functions of humor, there are some trends. First, some posts which were created almost a year apart had amassed similar amounts of views. This indicates that more recent posts are

gaining the same reach faster than posts created earlier. As such, one can deduce that more people were consuming humorous content closer to the one year mark of Russia's invasion, which in turn likely popularized such content more through social media algorithm (Deibert, 2019). This observation also aligns with the findings of Xu et al. (2022), where humor was "unrelated to [alleviating] psychological symptoms for Ukrainians in the initial stage of the war" (p. 7). Second, overall more videos with higher engagement appear to have emerged the longer the conflict continued. While the number of posts created in a specific month peaked in November, with an ensuing decline in the following months, this does not mean that there was less humor. In fact, it could rather testify to a continuing upwards trend in the creation of humor content as the invasion continued. As such, considering reach and timeframe in the analysis could help reveal how and why humor functioned in certain periods of the war.

### 3.2 Coping

Most posts in the sample (50) could be categorized as performing a coping function through humor, whether exclusively or in combination with another function. The prevalence of coping as a function of humor in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine may be in due to how broad coping is as a concept. As defined in [1.2](#), by coping through humor, groups and individuals use the resolution of incongruity to process and respond to their new and frightening experiences as well as facilitate stress-release, increasing their chances of survival. While there continues to be debate about the exact categorizations of coping-mechanisms, psychologists generally agree that there are four primary categories of coping: problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, support-seeking (Aldwin & Yancura, 2004; Algorani & Gupta, 2023). Within each category of coping, certain behaviors are observed as people respond to and try to manage stress. Problem-focused coping directly addresses the cause of stress by facing the stressor and/or planning for contingencies. Emotion-focused coping attempts to diminish the negative feelings associated with a stressor. Meaning-focused coping focuses on understanding and responding to the impact of the stressor on an individual's life as a whole. Finally, support-seeking coping relies on people turning to others (Algorani & Gupta, 2023).

Given how radically different the circumstances have become in Ukraine compared to before Russia's invasion, all forms of coping have followed as a response to help people handle stress (Xu et al., 2023, p. 6). Air raid sirens, drones, and missiles became intrusive and frightening staples of everyday life. At the same time, life was placed on a constant verge, making it difficult for Ukrainians to feel fully safe or at ease, even abroad. While people can employ humor in all four of the above-mentioned categories of coping, humor is most likely to manifest as part of emotion-based coping due to "the positive emotional states accompanying humor and laughter" (Varol, 2014, p. 571). This can be both by explicitly discussing stress through humor but also by using humor as a distraction. This is

evidenced by the fact that distracting humor became the sub-category with the most posts (23) in the analysis. Aside from distracting, the sampled posts were found to perform four other sub-functions: helping people express frustration and exhaustion through emotion-based coping in five posts, confront fears through problem-focused coping in six posts, reminisce about the past through meaning-focused coping in four posts, and empower themselves in six posts. While support-seeking coping was also present, results for this will be discussed in the section [3.3](#).

### 3.2.1 Distracting

The 'distracting' sub-category includes 23 posts which were not directly related to Russia's invasion in their content. While the humor lacked explicit mentions of the war, the posts were still created during the war period, making the context of political turmoil an important factor for how these posts were analyzed. In the comments of these posts, people expressed that the content was "much needed" (veteranykosmichnihviysk, 2022a) for them. As such, humor in this category could be considered an escape from, rather than an explicit vehicle with which to confront, Ukrainians' new reality. Laughter for the sake of laughter has positive emotional effects which reduce stress and return a sense of normalcy to people's lives (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, despite the posts not being related to the war, politically heavy topics such as language and identity were still frequently mentioned in the comments, indicating how full distraction or escape was near impossible.

Several popular posts provided a direct contrast to the ongoing unconventional and intense situation of Ukrainians by making light of otherwise simple, everyday situations. For example, the tendency of people to stack [tupperware](#) (MEMES\_FUN\_UA, 2022) in unruly ways, self-comparison when [working out](#) (n\_igorevich28, 2022), or difficulties with communicating on the [phone](#) (anton\_tymoshenko, 2023) featured humor based on the resolution of incongruity. A twist was introduced into conventionally average situations. By producing humor content about these topics, both the creators and consumers of these posts could temporarily focus on the 'simple' things in life, instead of the immense complexity which came from managing life within a war. However, looking further into 'distracting' humor, several intricacies are revealed. As will be discussed in greater detail in [3.3.1](#), many of these posts employed hashtags like *#HumorinUkrainian* and *#We'reLaughingSoWe'reNotGivingUp*, showing an awareness of humor as something that contributes to the consolidation of Ukrainian culture. Therefore, even when people wished to escape, they were still confronted with or, conversely, willingly confronted the war.

As an apparently uncomplicated distraction, the sample featured several TikToks which used an artificial voice to read out a standard-form joke, with a build up and a punchline (Martin & Ford, 2018, p. 19). In these TikToks, the background video was unrelated to the joke's content. Two accounts were especially prolific in sharing such content, to the extent that the single most viewed [TikTok](#)

(dinbraun, 2022) in the sample, at 8.9 million views at the time of sampling, was a non-war related anecdote. In the anecdote, a man with a stutter explains how he started stuttering. When he and his brother were younger, they grew up on goat's milk. When they got older and tried selling the goat, they found out that the goat was male. The man's brother died on the spot, and the man himself started stuttering. The humor of the twist is based on the man's, and subsequently the audience's, realization that the brothers were drinking semen instead of milk. While the intention of the joke is straightforward amusement, the posts' context deepens interpretation. It is unclear whether the account is Ukrainian or Russian, but the commenters on the post respond in both languages. Therefore, the comment section under this and similar posts is a place where Ukrainian and Russian-speakers exist side-by-side. This is likely because the humor is not politically charged. However, the top comment under the post is a Ukrainian-language comment reading "At first I didn't get it but then when I did get it 🤔". The formulation of the comment, which does not reveal the anecdote's twist, implies that the user enjoyed the moment in which they grasped the joke. However, in the replies other Ukrainian users point out how the commenter used the Russian word to say 'understand', instead of the correct Ukrainian word. The subsequent discussion escalates into whether it is appropriate to mix Ukrainian and Russian, and how according to some doing so constitutes the 'r\*pe' of the Ukrainian language. As such, it appears that the war followed Ukrainians into unrelated humor, when commenters initially only wished to focus on the humor itself.

Other posts in the sample confirm the tension between seeking distraction in non-war related topics, and the ubiquitous mentioning of the war and its consequences. In another [TikTok](#) (veteranykosmichnihviysk, 2022a) two Ukrainian podcasters are trying to solve a riddle "What is black and white and black and white and black and white?", as they try to guess "a zebra", "a homeless person's teeth", "my mood", "the newspapers", the answer is revealed to be "a nun rolling down a hill". The absurd answer to the riddle causes the podcasters to laugh. The comments express their amusement as well, especially with comments like "You made my day, thank you". In two instances, this type of comment was contrasted to the user's display names 'Glory to Ukraine' and the Ukrainian flag emoji, spotlighting their awareness and preoccupation with the war, but parallel acknowledgement of their need for a laugh.

Other content goes further, where the posters themselves acknowledge the political context of their content, despite the humor itself not being related to the war. One [prank](#) (brany\_official, 2022) subtly alludes to its Ukrainian context. The TikTok features a man wearing blue and yellow gloves approaching a woman with a music box containing chocolates. After allowing the woman to take all of the chocolates, the man wordlessly instructs her to put the chocolates back, at which the woman comments on his impoliteness. In the end, the woman is permitted to keep one chocolate and

receives a flower. Pranks relay situational humor, created by the obliviousness of the person being pranked (Martin & Ford, 2018). Yet, an implicit message is imbued in this TikTok to the Ukrainians watching: even when consuming content like this, you cannot forget about Ukraine. The man in the TikTok is purposefully wearing blue and yellow gloves, colors of the Ukrainian flag, marking this video as explicitly Ukrainian content.

Meanwhile, it is likely that certain non-war related humor became more popular exactly because of the war. The sample features a substantial number of TikToks which discuss relationships, with parents or romantic partners. Undoubtedly, many relationships with loved ones were impacted by the war as people moved, went into service, or passed away. To cope with these changes, people could turn to humor to process the change and distract themselves with ‘normal’ circumstances. This was the case for some content, such as a [girlfriend](#) (xydaja\_sterva, 2022) laboring over what gift to give her boyfriend for her birthday when she is already “the greatest gift” he has or a [boyfriend](#) (\_khristulya\_, 2022) taking better pictures of a random beetle than of his girlfriend. These posts contribute to a feeling that life will continue and is continuing, regardless of what is going on.

While war follows people into non-war related humor, implying that the context is near-impossible to fully escape, distracting humor has likely contributed to Ukrainians’ ability to persevere despite the circumstances, focusing on the simplicity or enjoyment of life.

### 3.2.2 Expressing Frustration and Exhaustion

The other category of emotion-focused coping, aside from distraction, was Ukrainians’ expression of frustration and exhaustion through humor, which was present in five posts. Despite frustration and exhaustion being two different experiences, in the thematic analysis they were grouped together due to the observation that many times people relayed either their frustration with how exhausted they were, or the exhaustion which has followed long-lasting frustration. Ukrainians used posts to convey how they were upset by how much they have had to endure and how much it has ‘taken out of them’. By explicitly naming these experiences, people could facilitate a release, and, as will be discussed in [3.3.2](#), find solace in others.

One post is most emblematic of the sub-category, for the complexity of allusions and context that it brings with it. The [TikTok](#) (misha\_lebiga, 2022a) was posted on 17/12/2022, where a man speaks with growing intensity:<sup>10</sup>

*“I read some news today that Egyptian archeologists have opened a sarcophagus in front of journalists which lay for 2600 years in the ground... SO YOU MEAN YOU HAVEN’T HAD ENOUGH ADVENTURES THIS YEAR?? RIGHT?? YOU ALSO NEED TO OPEN SOME KIND OF SARCOPHAGUS! Come on, I just want to survive until the end of the*

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<sup>10</sup> Capitalization and repeated punctuation added for emphasis.

*year, please. The news tomorrow: Egyptian archeologist sick with such a virus that you even have to put masks on your d\*ck, because you're sick with some sh\*t- WE'VE HAD ENOUGH".*

While this rant maintains a comedic tone because of its incongruity, as it is unlikely that the discovery and opening of an Egyptian sarcophagus would lead to the events described (i.e. masks on d\*cks), the creator is stating that just in case it is real, he, and other Ukrainians cannot take anymore suffering. The strength of his tone concurrently creates a sense of urgency, as it appears that he wishes to get his message across immediately. While the post initially seems to be more focused on preventing a repetition of COVID-19, referencing a 'virus' and 'masks', the poster is also referencing the war by mentioning how he 'just wants to survive until the end of the year'. The posting date informs this interpretation further, as the TikTok was made in December 2022, with a few weeks left until New Year's. As such, the post conveys something many Ukrainians likely feel: after exiting and becoming accustomed to one crisis, COVID-19, they were immediately plunged into another one with Russia's invasion. Ultimately, they have been exhausted and frustrated by both.

A similar 'end of year exhaustion sentiment' was present in another [TikTok](#) (youngteacher91, 2022b) posted by an account which features skits between students and a teacher. In the TikTok, the teacher says "That's all for today, Merry Christmas" when one of the students stands up and asks "Won't we have assignments?" to which the teacher then lip syncs to a superimposed audio which roughly translates "You make me sick" (literally, "You are [formulated as a noun] someone who makes others nauseous/throw up"). The audio playing in the background is the song Un Poco Loco (A Little Crazy) from the Disney movie Coco. It is a common meme audio used to express frustration and disappointment in situations as the subject drives the speaker 'a little crazy'. The post conveys how having homework in an instance when students finally get to go on break would be excessive. People want time to relax considering everything that they have experienced throughout the year, including both school and war.

By using humor to express frustration and exhaustion, the negative impact of these experiences was lessened, helping Ukrainians cope with the reality of war.

### 3.2.3 Confronting Fears

As demonstrated in [3.2.1](#), distracting humor frequently appeared in the sample as an emotion-based coping mechanism to reduce negative feelings by focusing on other inputs. To need distractions, certain stressors must be contributing to feelings of unease, sadness, or fear (Algorani & Gupta, 2023). In contrast to [3.2.1](#), this section focuses on problem-focused coping as a way of reducing stress through confrontation. Many new and frightening experiences suddenly became common for Ukrainians during the war. Horror and humor, despite having similar cognitive mechanisms, elicit

different emotions which either promote or inhibit effective coping (Straßburger, 2022). Fear as an emotion stifles action, by triggering avoidant behavior (Valentino et al., 2011). Therefore, people may need to overcome their fears to be rid of them. One way to do this is to make light of a fear, to paint it as less serious or threatening.

The six posts in the sample directly confronting fears focus on specific topics. Two posts in the sample address the specific response of people to the threat posed by missiles and drones. The fourth most popular [TikTok](#) (veteranykosmichnihviysk, 2022b) in the sample is a skit from the Ukrainian comedy show 'Liga Smihu' (League of Laughter). The show was originally performed live and broadcast on television, making it plausible that even more people consumed this content than the TikTok view-count indicates. The skit describes how since the start of the invasion, every friend group has acquired an 'expert' who can tell all of the different sounds of missiles apart with ease, and treats it with no fear at all. Meanwhile, the other friends duck and cover their heads at any sound, including those of a cat's meow and a fart. There are two instances of incongruity which are resolved here, on one hand it is the incongruity of someone not being remotely afraid of missiles as well as the incongruity that people are so afraid that they also flinch at normal sounds. Nonetheless, the expert friend reassures the rest that there is nothing to be afraid of. By elucidating these 'friends' people acquire a model to which they aspire towards: they can also be fearless experts, normalizing a terrifying situation. Humor which confronts fears in this way can be considered acute laughter (Galchinsky, 2016), which emerges in the grip of conflict. Yet, as will be discussed in [3.3.2](#), the skit's humorous appeal also relies on the relatability of the experience.

Power outages and their consequences were another set of fears confronted in posts. This theme only emerged after Russia initiated mass scale missile attacks in Ukraine, during the second half of 2022. By targeting power grids in major Ukrainian cities, Russia was attempting to reduce Ukraine's capacity to prepare and survive the winter, reducing the population's morale (Human Rights Watch, 2022). However, by responding to this threat with humor, the stress which followed from a new experience could be addressed. One [TikTok](#) (vadim\_nigay, 2022) presented a situation where a man wanted to drink some coffee at a cafe with light. The mention of 'with light' in the post caption alludes to the observation that public locations with power generators became the only places with electricity when outages became common. The post continues as the man enters the cafe and is overwhelmed by the presence of information technicians sitting with their laptops to use the light and Wi-Fi for work. In the video, this is represented by party music, comparing the information technicians to a rowdy crowd. While this experience could build annoyance, from people not being able to stay at home to finding overcrowded cafes, framing the experience through humor makes it easier to bear. Another [TikTok](#) (galin.adnriy, 2022) commented on how the 'new normal' impacted family dynamics,



as fathers and daughters celebrated when the electricity came back on so that they could watch TV, while mothers dreaded the return of electricity as it meant they would have to vacuum, do laundry, and dishes. Reading into the implicit meaning, one realizes how power outages may have unevenly impacted mothers and fathers. Yet, at the same time, with the incongruity of the mother wanting the power outage to continue, the humor conveys an unexpectedly 'positive' side to a bad experience: a justification to procrastinate house chores.

Evidently, the fears experienced by civilians and military differ, as the lives of the soldiers are even more readily threatened. To be able to continue fighting in brutal and protracted conflict, armies must maintain morale (Romansky et al., 2022). Consequently, soldiers themselves have posted humorous TikToks to cope with their circumstances. Following release theory, soldiers sharing humorous content and laughter from the battlefield could signal to those consuming their content to also be relaxed (Martin & Ford, 2018). In turn, audiences gained an opportunity to support the soldiers with positive comments. While this mutual support will be further discussed in [3.3.2](#), it is important to acknowledge the coping tendencies of soldiers. When entering the field, some soldiers lacked experience and struggled with the variety of new tasks which, if performed inadequately, could result in death. This immense responsibility likely exacerbated psychological stress. But, humor can transform struggles and embarrassment into something lighthearted, and in so doing helping soldiers persevere. In one instance, a [YouTube short](#) (ГОВОРИТЬ ВЕЛИКИЙ ЛЬВІВ, 2022) - short-form content similar to TikToks - featured soldiers trying to sort out their ammunition in the back of a truck. One of the soldiers compares the scene before him to "kids being driven to school... who haven't completed their homework... so their senior had to help out". If going out to the battlefield can be equated to going to school, then the task seems immediately less daunting, despite the evident lack of similarities between the experiences.

Humor has consequently helped people process and confront the brutal reality of the war, and emerge with the ability to act despite their fears.

#### 3.2.4 Reminiscing

Humor for distraction, expression of frustration and exhaustion, and the confrontation of fears functions by reducing (the prevalence of) negative emotions emerging from stressors. Yet, the focus of this section, meaning-focused coping, allows people to place stress in the larger picture, lessening its apparent impact (Algorani & Gupta, 2023). This can include finding the positive in one's life by looking back at memories of 'better times', as was the case in four sampled posts. A study found that reminiscing about past laughter itself can have beneficial effects, by reminding individuals that laughter at some point was and consequently still can be a part of their lives (Bazzini et al., 2007).

The value of reminiscing humor is evident from the third most popular post with in the sample, posted by the official [TikTok](#) (ze\_\_president, 2022) account of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The president is sitting in an interview, when the interviewer asks “What is your favorite joke about Putin?”, to which Zelenskyy replies “Well, yes, I have one... But I’m not sure if I’m ready to tell it. I think you would laugh but in Russia they would all cry. So I’m not sure that this is the right place... it’s called dark humor,” after which he laughs (see *Image 2.*). The comments primarily note how it is good to see Zelenskyy laugh ‘again’. The repeated use of the word ‘again’ can be interpreted as an allusion to



*Image 2.* Zelenskyy laughing during an interview when mentioning his favorite joke about Putin (ze\_\_president, 2022).

Zelenskyy’s career as a comedian. There is a public awareness in Ukraine, and now globally, that Zelenskyy had in fact played the role of Ukraine’s president in the comedy series *Sluha Narodu* (*Servant of the People*), where a history teacher was near-accidentally elected as Head of State. Parallels have been readily found between Zelenskyy’s staged role and his current position as actual President. But, to the surprise of many, Zelenskyy became a role model and inspiration of leadership since the start of Russia’s invasion (Spector, 2023; Trushevych, 2022). He effectively communicates with Ukrainians everyday, guiding them through tragedy and towards victory. However, his demeanor has changed radically to his fictitious counterpart; he appears worn out and ever-serious. This clarifies the context of the TikTok, in which the sentiment is that people would prefer a world in which Zelenskyy can once more laugh freely, as, if he can laugh, so can the rest of Ukraine. The fact that Zelenskyy can be seen laughing in TikTok is perceived as a good start.

Other posts featuring reminiscing humor also focus on Ukrainian humor before the war which was present in Ukrainian comedy shows. [Clips](#) (djuiceua, 2022) from one show, *Faina Ukraina* (a play on words approximately translating to ‘Great Ukraine’) running from 2008-2010, featured in several posts. The show’s episodes contain breakaway skits of exaggerated portrayals of Ukrainian life. One clip stars actor Serhiy Prytula, who was the director of *Faina Ukraina* and now became an active contributor to the war effort through donation drives. Similarly to Zelenskyy’s video, the comments reminisce about his comedic career. Despite being satirical content, the comments on the posts included in the posts retrospectively see *Faina Ukraina* as an endearing homage to Ukraine and what

makes it unique. Furthermore, some comments allude to the fact that all of the televised humor since the start of the invasion is too focused on the war, lacking the sincerity of the humor of the past when Ukrainians were able to laugh at themselves in endearment. It is possible that the popularity of these specific posts comes from this feeling. The specific focus on the unique quirks on Ukraine will also be discussed in [3.3.3](#). Ukrainians valuing Ukraine as they did in the comedy shows alludes to their remembrance of a relatively more peaceful and carefree Ukraine.

While these posts may also act as a distraction, helping people imagine a world without war, comments which use words like ‘again’ and ‘before’ alongside comparisons between the past and present give these posts an explicit temporal dimension, justifying the theme of reminiscing. In a way, these posts also mourn what was lost, which is in its own right help with the processing of new conditions (Galchinsky, 2016). Thinking back to better times can serve as inspiration to try and get those times back, or at least carry on the memory.

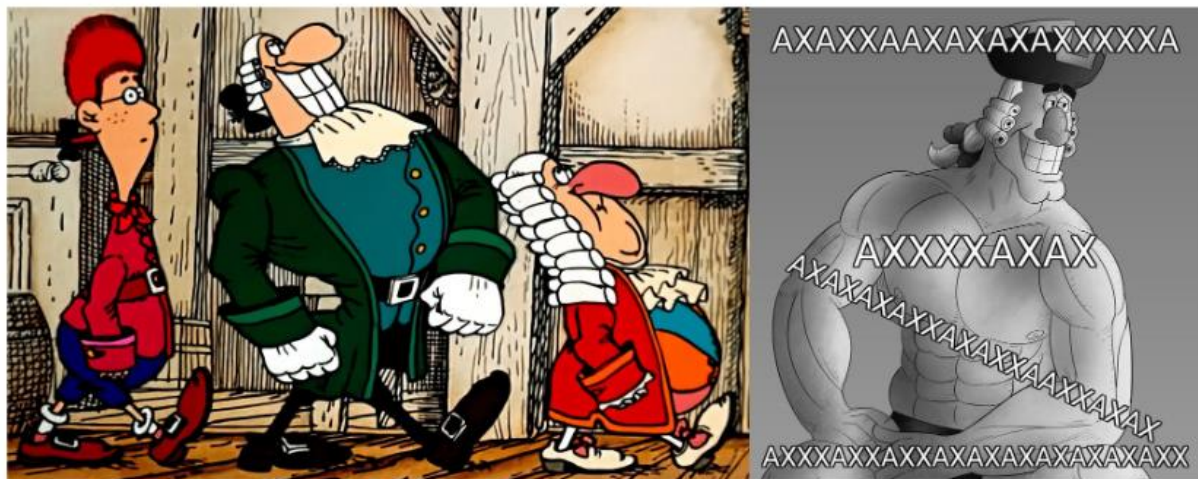
### 3.2.5 Empowering Self

The final sub-category of coping humor uncovered in the course of the thematic discourse analysis featured posts which focused on raising the confidence of Ukrainians. Beyond merely confronting their fears, individuals can use humor to empower themselves by creating a reality in which anything is possible, despite the grueling circumstances. This kind of function of humor, appearing in six posts, was most prevalent among soldiers in the field, for similar reasons as already discussed in [3.2.3](#). By treating their circumstances as something that soldiers can laugh about, the task that they have at hand could become less daunting.

The acquisition of unshakable confidence as a means of rising beyond one’s fears was found in a [TikTok](#) (magic\_oneday, 2022b) captioned “When vile Shaheds are flying above my house” where a soldier pretends to hit a drone with the apple he was eating. Here the humorous effect comes from the resolution of incongruity. Throwing an apple at a Shahed, an Iranian drone, would likely not knock it down. But the post creates an impression that confidence is all it takes to confront such weapons. The implicit message emerges: Ukrainians are not afraid of the weapons used against them and will use anything they have to fight back. This echoes stories which emerged during the war, like the grandma in Kyiv that did actually manage to hit a drone out of the sky with a jar of pickled tomatoes (Jankowicz, 2022). Further of note is the fact that the account posting about the Shaheds is that of an active-duty soldier, relating directly to posts relaying the battlefield experiences.

One of the most prolific accounts in this category is the official account of the Ukrainian border guard service. As mentioned in [1.4](#), the war in Ukraine has frequently been called a TikTok War, evidenced further by the legitimation of the platform as a medium for communication by official state agencies (Kleisner & Garney, 2022). While there are likely guidelines which soldiers must follow to

post TikTok content, the Ukrainian Armed Forces recognize the utility of communicating to a widespread audience to convey information about the frontline, garner support, and maintain morale (Romansky et al., 2022). One [TikTok](#) (borderguard\_ua, 2022) from the Ukrainian border guard does all three. The video depicts three men in military uniform and a dog walking to a ‘phonk’ tune with the caption “Going with the boys to catch those who cross the border illegally”. The TikTok follows a [meme format](#) (Meme playlist, 2022) which became popular in August 2022 based on a clip from the Ukrainian-made 1988 Soviet cartoon ‘Treasure Island’ which features three cartoon characters walking (see *Image 3.*), overlaid with the same music as used in the given TikTok. The character in the middle, Dr. Livesey, was presented in memes as being a representation of a ‘chad’ or ‘sigma male’, modern internet terms used to describe morally and physically exemplary men (see *Image 3.*). Ever since the cartoon gained a viral status, it has been reclaimed by Ukrainians as ‘Ukrainian-made’, rather than merely a product of the Soviet Union, adding to the meme’s value for Ukraine.



*Image 3.* Screenshot from ‘Treasure Island’ on which the walking trend is based and meme with Dr. Livesey represented as a super-strong ‘chad’ (Know Your Meme, 2022).

These intertextual references to a relevant meme imbue the TikTok with the impression that these border soldiers are also ‘chads’ for the work that they do, as they are mimicking these characters. At the same time, their core responsibilities are clarified to audiences through a simple caption. The comments on the TikTok support this interpretation, praising the men for both being ‘chads’ and for their indispensable contribution to Ukraine’s war effort. Finally, by using the trend the border guard has increased the potential reach of the video, garnering a supportive audience.

Two other posts in the sample featured interviews with soldiers in the field from the same account, where the interviewer asked the soldiers ‘stupid’ questions. The soldiers answered the questions frankly simplifying frightening circumstances. One soldier, [answering](#) (mcmirage, 2022) the question “What happens if you’re in the field and you run out of ammunition?” immediately replies “What do you mean what happens? If you run out you take them from a fellow soldier, but also that means you didn’t take enough with you, and if you didn’t take enough with you then you’re an idiot.

You need to take extra. And if you don't have any then..." the soldier knocks on the van they are standing by, implying you die. Humor allows these soldiers to relay their experiences without being too gory but still clear about what happens. But it also demonstrates their confidence in knowing what they are doing, and realizing the full ramifications of their work.

Some videos focus not just on confidence in military performance, but also on the strength of their relationships and support systems. In one [TikTok](#) (dunaev\_yurii, 2023) a soldier addresses how his relationship with his partner has remained just as strong or even strengthened during the war. In the TikTok, a fellow soldier rolls up in his van and starts talking about a lady who seemingly went through five military control posts, cussed everyone out, saying "Don't stop me, I'm going to my husband". A soldier with a rifle turns around and lip syncs to a song with the lyrics "She's mine, that one's mine", with pride on his face. The caption reads "My dear is capable of everything" and below the post is added "even for a short meeting". A lot of relationships were likely placed under strain following Russia's invasion as men were forced to go to the frontline to fight, still here it is made clear that love will persevere despite or *in spite* of any obstacles.

Coping humor, from emotion-based distraction and expression of frustration and exhaustion to the confrontation of fears, reminiscing the past and self-empowerment allowed Ukrainians to process the contrast between their old and new reality to effectively survive and persevere.

### 3.3 Cohesion

As mentioned in [3.2](#), the cohesive function of humor is ubiquitous in Ukrainian humor, both consciously and unconsciously, directly and indirectly, being present in 37 posts. As defined in [1.2](#), groups and individuals use humor to highlight the collective nature of their new and frightening experiences, creating and/or strengthening existing social bonds within in-groups and with out-groups which enable mutual support and perseverance. Even if humor did not explicitly address Russia's invasion and its effects, individuals interpreted content as relating to the struggle of Ukrainians to move away from Russians, with humor being a building block towards a distinct Ukrainian identity. Additionally, humor which may have been intended to relay the experiences and for the coping of one individual likely resonated with and validated the experiences of others (Varol, 2014, p. 568). Many posts would likely not have gained millions of views, if they were not inherently relatable alongside being humorous. As such, humor was able to "supplant and at times redefine identities within an internally [diverse society]" (ibid.). Consequently, this thesis found three sub-categories of cohesive humor: humor which emphasizes the unity stemming from Ukrainian humor itself in 33 posts, humor underlining the shared struggles of Ukrainians in six posts, and humor appreciating the uniqueness of the Ukrainian identity in six posts.

Interestingly, no posts in the sample focused on the cohesion of Ukrainians with non-Ukrainians with their allies in the European Union or NATO, despite member-state countries and populations providing significant social and military support for Ukraine (Bosse, 2022). It is likely that this type of external humor, aimed at promoting solidarity and garnering support (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014), was still present as a result of Ukraine's political turmoil. However, it was not as widespread or popular as internal humor, used to maintain and promote unity within Ukraine. Additionally, this does not mean that foreigners did not consume and engage with the posts in the sample. Based on the sample, there was no doubt that Ukrainians were the primary audience of the posts being analyzed.

### 3.3.1 Finding Unity in Humor

Even if the content of posts did not allude to cohesion among Ukrainians or elements of group dynamics, other aspects of posts often did. A majority of sampled posts promoted Ukrainian language humor content, i.e. where the captions and audio were in Ukrainian. This is likely a general acknowledgement of how Ukrainian humor, as a part of Ukrainian culture, has been historically erased and outcompeted by Russian content. A conflation of the two cultures by outsiders, as well as the historical Russification of Ukraine (Mankoff, 2022), has made 'native' Ukrainian content less widespread and diverse. Following Russia's invasion there has been a stronger push to make Ukrainian cultural content – including humor – more rich, common, and appreciated. To promote this, such content is explicitly identified as 'Ukrainian'. In the sampled posts this is most visible through hashtags which label the attached content as #UkrainianTikTok, #HumorinUkrainian, and #UkrainianHumor. Alongside these hashtags, patriotic hashtags were frequently featured including #GlorytoUkraine, #GlorytotheHeroes, #WeWillWin, #EverthingWillBeUkraine, and #UkraineisUnited. This reveals that Ukrainians recognize the direct relationship between humor and identity-building and consolidation. Humor, as a notable element of language and culture, is both something Ukrainians can bond over and something which can make the Ukrainian identity distinct. Furthermore, by labeling Ukrainian language humor so expressly, people who want to consume only Ukrainian-made content, for example to practice their Ukrainian or to support such content, can easily do so.

One post is particularly exemplary of these observations. The [TikTok](#) (hectorjimenezbravo, 2023) features a man performing a skit. He takes the Ukrainian expression "Measuring salt by eye" (translated to "measuring salt *on* the eye") literally, pretending to put salt in his eye and reacting in agony. The intertextual level of irony embedded in this post stems from the fact that the man in the video is Hector Jimenez-Bravo, a Colombian-born chef who is considered one of the best chefs currently in Ukraine. Even Hector, originally a foreigner, is able to make jokes in Ukrainian and promotes content in Ukrainian, setting a standard for all the rest.

Another set of hashtags was uncovered in the sample: those which unequivocally recognize humor as a beneficial and necessary response to the war. The hashtags #сміємосьотженездаємось (#We'reLaughingSoWe'reNotGivingUp) and #щобнеплакатъясміялась (#WeLaughedSoWeWouldn'tCry), show Ukrainian's conscious use of humor as a means of responding to political turmoil. While these slogans existed prior to 2022, yet became prevalent only after.<sup>11</sup> The hashtags convey the sentiment that humor is something which allows Ukrainians to continue their fight, without drowning in sorrow. This also suggests that as long as Ukrainians can continue to laugh, they will not stop fighting. As a means to coping through humor, this resonates with the findings of Üngör & Verkerke (2015), where humor gave energy to individuals in context of genocide. However, beyond coping there is an inherent cohesive element in both hashtags. They start with the collective 'we', framing the recognition of humor's importance in a identity-wide sense. This creates an implication: if some of 'us' are laughing, then the rest also shouldn't give up or cry. In Ukrainian, the hashtag #We'reLaughingSoWe'reNotGivingUp has an embedded rhyme between the active verbs 'laughing' and 'not giving up/resisting'. This has lent itself well to the sloganization of the phrase, as it appears in many more places than just social media but also in traditional media like Ukrainian United News telethon. In this way certain sampled [posts](#) (seleranabdziuk, 2022), most often non-war related stand-up routines, showed an awareness of the implications of the war. Comedians appear to be trying to make intentional contributions to the construction and strengthening of Ukrainian identity, as well as Ukraine's resistance by speaking Ukrainian and identifying humor's importance.

The conscious recognition of humor as a tool for resistance has given it additional strength, as the consumption of humor can be seen as a legitimate and valid part of Ukraine's resistance.

### 3.3.2 Expressing Shared Struggles

While psychologically, support-seeking behavior is considered a form of coping (Algorani & Gupta, 2023), in analyzing the functions of humor responding to political turmoil, such behavior rather falls under both coping and cohesive functions. As such, the discussion on the six posts expressing shared struggles focuses on humor directly emphasizing the collective experiences of Ukrainians following the war and how these shared experiences have brought the population closer together. This sub-category occurred parallel to other functions of humor such as confronting fears ([3.2.3](#)) or criticizing Russian social and military failures ([3.4.2](#)).

The emblematic post in this category is also the most popular post in the sample as a whole, which speaks to how sharing relatable experiences is an important and widespread function of humor. The [TikTok](#) (alina.vasylieva, 2022) features a compilation of bloopers from the Ukrainian United News telethon. As mentioned in [3.1](#), reporters were caught in their mistakes – saying “United States of

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<sup>11</sup> This observation can be made from a straightforward Google search for the slogans.

Ukraine”, instead of America, current “U.S. President Donald Biden” – as well as incorrectly identifying regions, names, and tripping, laughing, swearing on live television. The moments themselves can be considered situational humor, where the comedy arises from ‘inappropriate’ behavior in the serious context (Martin & Ford, 2018) of a war time news broadcast. It is likely that many of the mistakes happened unintentionally, possibly because the reporters were overwhelmed or tired, leading to slip-ups. This can be inferred from the observation that the reporters often laugh or swear at themselves, as soon as they realize what they had said, recognizing the incongruity they created. On TikTok, the compilation was explicitly shared as humorous content. While this is not stated in the post, the implicit message appears to be a normalization of mistakes made during serious moments. Mistakes can be made by anyone, as all Ukrainians are adjusting to a new and difficult situation. The reporters are people too, with their own struggles and needs to cope with the war. But the news reporters are in a relative important position compared to average civilians. In times of political turmoil they may be trusted and turned to even more than usual to give accurate and relevant updates about how the situation develops. The humor of this post arises from the resolution of incongruity between the rare position that they are in and how apparently common mistakes have been. But because Ukrainians appear to be comfortable with laughing about this, Ukrainians themselves can also be more comfortable and forgiving with themselves making mistakes as they adjust to political turmoil. The relatability of humor consequently founds its unifying effect.

This is also found in humor which confronts fears, whether of missiles like the in [TikTok](#) (veteranykosmichnihviysk, 2022a) excerpt of a stand-up routine about the ‘expert’ friend who can recognize every sound that missiles make or [encountering](#) (vadim\_nigay, 2022) a café full of information technicians during a power outage. These posts have been explicitly framed in collective perspective using the words ‘everyone’ and ‘we all’. People would not get the humor of the post if they didn’t experience or couldn’t imagine experiencing similar situations.

In other posts, soldiers also present the collective nature of their experience. In one [TikTok](#) (I3asyan, 2022), a puppy is being recorded on video doing its best not to fall asleep while sitting up. The puppy is wobbly and several times almost falls over. In frame is also a soldier’s boot, letting the viewers know that this is likely somewhere on the front line. Since the start of the war, many Ukrainian soldiers adopted animals left behind when people fled settlements, as a means of gaining comfort. Here too, the puppy is spoken to endearingly, with the caption reading “The fighter got tired.” This phrasing implies that the puppy is as much of a fighter as the other soldiers, and has been exhausted by the day. Still, as is heard in the background, the soldiers are commenting on how hard he is fighting not to sleep and continue to keep guard, along with his fellow soldiers. The humor stems from incongruity, as one would not expect something as cute as a puppy to be fighting in a violent war. But



perhaps here the puppy's true battle is with sleepiness. While initially it may not appear as though the video serves a cohesive function, when the target audiences of the post are considered it is apparent that the content can appeal to all demographics. Kids will like the cute puppy, while adults will relate to its tiredness and soldiers to it being a fellow fighter. The puppy serves as a stand in for Ukrainians and their experiences, and realizing this in humor allows all audiences to feel reassured that their struggles are valid.

By emphasizing how all Ukrainians are struggling with adjusting to new circumstances through humor, the people consuming the content may feel less alone, reducing stress and allowing them to find reassurance in others.

### 3.3.3 Appreciating Ukrainian Uniqueness

The final sub-category of posts with a cohesive function were those which explicitly clarified and valued Ukrainian identity, totaling six posts in the sample. As outlined in [1.2](#), during war and genocide the very identities which allow humor to exist are threatened (Üngör & Verkerke, 2015, p. 82). However, humor which helps people identify what about their identities they value and want to preserve helps an in-group maintain cohesion, despite the existential threat. This includes topics which could be considered embarrassing by outsiders, which are treated by the in-group not with self-deprecation but with endearment.

For example, one [TikTok](#) (vichnyirevoliutsioner, 2022) features a man telling an anecdote from his college days where his mom packed Ukrainian holubtsi (lettuce wrapped meat) for him in a chips packet instead of a box. While commuting on a hot day, the holubtsi started smelling bad and the bus driver kicked the man out because he thought he had sh\*t himself. Afterwards, the video cuts to the same man calling his mother after the fact, questioning why she ever thought it was a good idea to transport the food in such a bag. This video in itself had previously become a meme. While the event itself was embarrassing, the TikTok frames it as something positive to laugh about, as the man's fellow presenters argue that his mother was only doing her best. Several comments allude to the fact that they would give anything for some of their mother's holubtsi. As a national dish, holubtsi are something that Ukrainians value. Simultaneously, this situation as it was conveyed would only be funny for Ukrainians, adding to the feeling of a distinct identity in a time when Ukrainians are subjected to violence for who they are. This is similar to another [TikTok](#) (\_vitaliimelnyk\_, 2022), which features the uniquely Ukrainian experience of going to a specific gas station chain, OKKO, and having to deal with excessive promotions and questions asked at the check-out. However, in the holubtsi post a debate arose in the comments section about how the man speaking in the video continuously mispronounced the word holubtsi, by stressing the wrong syllable, demonstrating that internal tensions still exist. Regional differences in accents are under increased scrutiny due to a potential

desire to homogenize the in-group. In this post, the debate settled on a recognition of the validity of different pronunciations in regions of Ukraine.

In other posts, language as a (necessary) national unifier is brought up in the comments. A [TikTok](#) (eliinois, 2023) features a mother pretending to get excrement (actually Nutella) on her daughter's hand when she asks her daughter to bring some toilet paper. The young girl reacts calmly to the situation, not with the usual disgust which would be expected from children and even some adults. As the conversation between the mother and the daughter occurs in Ukrainian throughout the TikTok, the commenters note how well the girl speaks Ukrainian. They discuss how the little girl and kids like her, are the future of the Ukraine as a nation, as they are confident that these kids will be able to continue to protect the Ukrainian language.

However, the topic of language also became a contentious issue since Russia's invasion, as addressed by a [TikTok](#) (slava\_bogu\_volodyy, 2023) featuring a comedian's stand-up routine. The man comments:

*"Right now a lot of people are switching to Ukrainian. You know who has the hardest time switching to Ukrainian? The people who speak 'Surzhyk' [a mix of Ukrainian and Russian]. Because of you Russian-speakers who are switching to Ukrainian, we surzyk-speaking have it f\*cking difficult. Because before you started switching, everyone thought we were speaking Ukrainian. It's really difficult.. Surzhyk is not that- Surzhyk is, you know, when it's autumn and everyone is switching from shorts to pants, meanwhile you're standing in breeches like an idiot. With who are you?"*

While many Ukrainians started speaking exclusively Ukrainian to combat Russian imperialist justifications for their 'special military operation', others continued speaking Russian. In some instances, Russian-speakers were labeled 'betrayers' of Ukraine for continuing to speak the language of the enemy. However, the piece of humor here diverts from the tension between Ukrainian and Russian-speakers, focusing instead on those in-between. While many Ukrainians speak Surzhyk, many others also speak both Ukrainian and Russian, potentially relating to mixing the two languages. By making light of a politically heavy topic and pointing out his experiences, as a member of the group that is being made fun of, this comedian encourages all Ukrainians to laugh together, albeit at the slight expense of a his own identity. Still, there is no hostility in his approach, rather a loving mockery of those like him who are stuck in the middle, as implied linguistically and through the simile where their position is compared to the middle ground between shorts and pants. This is one of the only posts in the sample which so explicitly dissects a political topic, consciously presenting and discussing the political consequences of Russia's invasion for Ukraine, and softening them through humor.

Other situations also create cohesion by joking about specific Ukrainian behaviors. One [TikTok](#) (djuiceua, 2022), playing an excerpt from a comedy show, makes fun of people from Odessa, a city in south-eastern Ukraine. A mother and her son are presented as being especially money-oriented, as

her son exploits his school and classmates by, for example, selling the wrong answers for tests to teach them a lesson. People from Odessa in the comments admit gladly that ‘we are like this’ and enjoy the portrayal along with other Ukrainians. The parodying and satire parallels the TikToks which feature clips from the aforementioned show *Faina Ukraina*.

Meanwhile, other humor presents the unique ways in which Ukrainians are and have come to fight the war against Russia. Ukraine’s Western allies in NATO have provided weapons to Ukraine, from armor, and ammunition to armored carriers, tanks, and helicopters (Mertens et al., 2023). Several weapons gained the status of memes for both their decisiveness in the conflict and how much attention was placed on their acquisition. U.S.-made GM-148 Javelin anti-tank weapons have been depicted being cradled by a Saint-like figure, the visual becoming known as ‘St. Javelin’. The humor places two incongruous concepts, an anti-tank weapon and a Saint together, to represent the precarious situation of Ukraine. In turn, the image became a symbol of spiritual and military Ukrainian protection. Meanwhile, the Turkish Baykar Bayraktar TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicle became the subject of a Ukrainian song-tribute, for its effectiveness against vehicles and missile systems in the initial stages of the Russian invasion (Romansky et al., 2022). While the weapons have been embraced as indispensable by Ukraine, soldiers also faced difficulties integrating various interfaces into one operational system. This obstacle is elaborated by one [TikTok](#) (magic\_oneday, 2022a), where a soldier filmed himself pretending to read the French-language instruction to a U.S.-made M142 HIMARS rocket launcher. The audio sounds by him starting to read the French article “Le...” several times before tossing the instructions aside and saying “Le go f\*ck yourself.” While the humor stems from the apparent expectation that Ukrainians should understand all of the languages of their weapon-donor allies, the soldiers know that in fact they have integrated these weapons effectively.

The final [TikTok](#) (capjeka, 2022) for this sub-category features a skit of a man pretending to act as different Ukrainian companies, indicated by the video captions. The dialogue begins:

*Nova Poshta (Ukrainian postal service): “We’re going to come to Kherson first”*

*UKR Poshta (Ukrainian postal service): “Who decided this? We are going to be in Kherson first!”*

*Nova Poshta: “With your speed of delivery? We’re still going to be first.”*

*UKR Poshta: “At least the people are waiting for us because we have cool stamps.”*

*Nova Poshta: “Still we’ll be first.”*

The argument continues back and forth a few more times, when suddenly a clip is cut in of two men on a motorcycle with a sidecar labeled with the logo of ATB (Ukrainian supermarket chain). An audio plays of a man yelling “ON TO DONBAS!” and then different clips of cars and people going fast play

with phonk music in the background. This TikTok implies that while postal services are important to deliver resources to newly liberated areas, ATB would arrive at the locations first with their delivery services regardless of any circumstances. ATB had in itself become a meme as a near-patriotic symbol of Ukraine. Some comments reveal agreement with the appreciation for ATB, as one says “Seems like ATB was even earlier than the Armed Forces of Ukraine,” implying that it was ATB who liberated Ukrainian territories from Russian occupation.

Ukrainian digital humor took pride in and spotlighted almost all aspects of Ukrainian culture: from humor itself – as an explicitly identified part of Ukrainian resistance – to food, companies, ways of combat and family relations, allowing Ukrainians to bond over and get a better sense of their identity.

### 3.4 Criticism

While only 11 posts in the sample could be categorized as performing a critiquing function of humor, these posts were still present, providing insight into Ukrainians’ attitude towards Russians since the invasion. As defined in [1.2](#), groups and individuals use humor as a vehicle for critique of an out-group to empower themselves for resistance on a politically conscious level. Having seen that Ukrainians conveyed their willingness to do and go through anything to maintain their distinct identity in coping and cohesive humor, criticism has allowed Ukrainians to further distinguish themselves from their enemy. The primary narrative promoted by Russia to justify its invasion asserts that the ‘special military operation’ was conceived to liberate an oppressed brotherly peoples from fascistic Ukrainian nationalists (Romansky et al., 2022). Embedded within these conceptualizations are several assumptions. First, following Russian doctrine, Russia’s and Ukraine’s futures are necessarily interwoven. If Ukraine shows signs of turning away from Russia, then this is assumed to be the result of Western meddling, rather than Ukraine’s aspiration towards self-determination. Second, the Ukrainian attempts to uphold sovereignty are labeled fascistic, due to the alleged oppression of Russian-speaking Ukrainians (Mankoff, 2022; Romansky et al., 2022). Yet, without looking into the direct existential threat stemming from such a narrative, Ukrainians easily find hypocrisies within it. How could the Russians possibly equate ‘liberation and protection of a brotherly peoples’ with the bombing of civilian housing and mass graves? How does aspiration towards democracy and sovereignty equate to fascism? While this harrowing and self-contradicting reality is difficult to wrap one’s mind around, humor has become one way of confronting it.

In some of the posts within the sample, there is almost an attempt to explain away Russian actions by commenting on Russian stupidity and ridiculousness on all levels of society, one uncovered sub-category with six posts. This way, the reality appears to be that Russians are not self-aware enough to realize the contradictions within their own beliefs and resist Putin’s regime. However, some

critiques are more direct, mocking Russia's social and military failures while elevating the successes of Ukraine in resisting the invasion, as seen in five posts. While this kind of criticism through humor could constitute an attempt to change Russians' attitudes, often being presented in the Russian language, this is not necessarily the case. Critiquing humor can also reaffirm cohesion, as the Ukrainian in-group is presented as being morally superior to their enemy. It is postulated that critiquing humor is least common in the sample because other means of resistance against Russia (direct violent confrontation, sanctions, and media campaigns) have already had some of the effects which could be achieved through humor.

### 3.4.1 Russian Ridiculousness

Six posts in the sample present Russians as embarrassingly airheaded and indifferent. The humor of such a presentation of the enemy relies primarily on incongruity but also establishing superiority. On one hand, seeing the atrocities that Russia is committing, one expects a cold and calculated enemy which has as its goal the destruction of Ukraine. However, by presenting Russians rather as chronically goofing off and out of touch with reality, their threatening image as well as an actual sense of threat, is diminished. In turn, Ukrainian citizens can affirm that they are not like the Russians (they can identify manipulation and deceit) as a defensive mechanism (Speier, 1998).

One [TikTok](#) (ketkakot, 2023) in the sample compiles clips from Putin's annual address to the state, made on February 21st, 2023, almost exactly a year after the start of Russia's invasion. The TikTok, made on the same day as the address, focuses specifically on the audience: high ranking Russian politicians and state officials. Over each clip, a Ukrainian voice sounds the supposed thoughts of the audience members, based on their facial expressions, movements, and co-interactions:

*"Wait, did I turn off the soup in the morning?" "I think so"*

*"Oh I taped my eyes so that I wouldn't sleep hahaha"*

*"So I don't get it, are we not receiving medals today?"*

*"God, how could an iron even fall on his face like that?"*

*"I'll rub my beard... ow, nothing to eat, then my mustache..."*

*"God this hat is pressing so hard I can't take it anymore!" "Be quiet, at least you have a hat!"*

*"Bayu bayushki-bayu..."*

*"I was actually on my way to the store to get some bread..."*

*"Look, I stepped into some sh\*t" "Gosh, it really suits you!"*

*“Alright boys, spades is the trump suit, seven of diamond, I’m playing” “I’ll take it”  
“Eight of diamond”*

*“Oh don’t cry, want me to tickle you with my whiskers?”*

*“Oh God, who’s perfume reaks like that?” “Yesterday you liked it actually... and today  
you react like this? Mhm.”*

The video creates a sense that these people, who likely contributed to planning the war against Ukraine, care about anything and everything else except for what is being said to them by their leader. The caption which reads “The situation/mood during the performance of the Tzar” clarifies the irony: even though the Tzar, sarcastically implied to be Putin due to his imperialist aspirations and Russians’ sworn loyalty, is in front of them talking about a literal war, their minds wander elsewhere because they do not actually care. Several references are made to people trying not to fall asleep, either by taping their eyes open or by trying not to listen to a lullaby, implying that the speech is boring. Others are distracting themselves, thinking about whether they finished their household tasks or by playing card games. Implicitly, the audio also makes fun of the appearance of the audience members, by calling mustaches ‘whiskers’ or by commenting that ‘sh\*t’ matches an outfit. But, by putting these words in the mouths of the people themselves, an impression is created that Russians themselves know how silly they look. This way, the people who threaten Ukraine are presented as incompetent, making them immediately less threatening and not something to take seriously. Interestingly, it may have been the case that the creator of this TikTok had watched the address of Putin specifically to make a video like this, considering how quickly it was created. This is corroborated by the post description which reads “Can’t go anywhere without humor”, implying that in order for Ukrainians to be able to watch this address, it had to be put through a humorous filter.

Another [TikTok](#) ([\\_guculochka2](#), 2022) presents the exaggerated ridiculousness of Russians through a conversation among supposed Russian internet personalities. Several similar videos became widespread in 2022, being perceived as demonstrations of the backwardness of Russian world views. However, the researcher could not establish whether this content is a parody or genuine, as all comments on such videos gave conflicting answers. Still, considering how a possible satire became difficult to distinguish from the constructed reality of Ukrainian perceptions of Russians, the resonance of truth adds to the humor. In the TikTok at hand, the Russian speakers point out how Ukrainians are odd because they buy special toilets and food for their cats, instead of just using newspapers or cloth, or having the cats “eat what we eat.” As such, Russians seemingly even label kitty litter and canned food as strange and superfluous “Western technology”, in comparison to what is already ‘good enough’ in Russia. Afterwards, a woman continues, “I heard actually that these Ukrainians hate cats, they say death to cats,” with the others on call corroborate this. They allude to

the Soviet Union, and how in that time no one would have even considered these kinds of things. The caption of the post simply reads 'poor cats', with emphasis on how the woman in the video pronounces the word 'cats' in Russian, with an exaggerated 'a', mocking her way of speaking. The comments under the TikTok point to the conversation's absurdity, wondering how the Russian population could possibly be so backward that even pet food is odd to them. The humor comes from this clip serving as 'proof' to many Ukrainians of the fact that Russians have been absolutely brainwashed into believing in their superiority, seeing all things foreign as evil. This clip in fact became widespread in Ukrainian memes, as Ukrainians held their cats while the audio played of the woman accusing Ukrainians of saying "death to cats." This way, Ukrainians ironically embraced this stereotype. The woman in the video, 'Bagira', became a meme in other instances for spreading various conspiracy theories. For example, Bagira claimed that the Ukrainian supermarket chain ATB actually stands for 'Abama, Tramp and Baiden'<sup>12</sup> (Obama, Trump and Biden), with her Russian pronunciation making 'Obama' start with an A. In turn, Ukrainians made videos and memes with the audio, laughing at a conspiracy that was so absurd that it didn't need to be countered. As mentioned, it is unclear whether these conversations are real or staged. However, Ukrainians' willingness to believe them and at minimum laugh at parody provides a means of demeaning an otherwise deadly enemy.

### 3.4.2 Russian Social and Military Failure

While Ukrainians established the pretext of overall Russian discreditation, the failures of the Russian Armed Forces on the frontlines as well as the societal failure of Russians to protest Putin's actions were presented as embarrassments.

Prior to the start of Russia's invasion, IR scholars considered Russia to be a threatening military power, in terms of its manpower as well as cutting edge technological capabilities. However, due to miscalculations about Ukraine's ability to fight back, much of Russia's initial onslaught was countered within the first weeks of full-scale fighting. While Ukraine's army is significantly smaller and boasts less of an arsenal, Ukraine had effectively integrated eight years of experience fighting against Russia in the east of Ukraine in their 2022 retaliation. These successes echoed in humor content, where Ukraine's superiority was contrasted with repeated Russian failures, despite their initially greater perceived capabilities. One [TikTok](#) (rakvalerchik, 2022) uses an existing video of cars parking in a parking lot. A black car, labeled 'Second Army' in the TikTok, arrives and parks poorly next to a red car, labeled 'Kherson'. This initial set up alludes to Russia's partial occupation of the Kherson region in southern Ukraine. However, subsequently two more cars arrive labeled Special Operation Forces of Ukraine and Ukrainian Armed Forces, which park in such a way that the 'Second Army' car now becomes completely boxed in, making it very difficult to maneuver. Through the video, the mousetrap

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<sup>12</sup> A's added for emphasis of Bagira's pronunciation.

that was created in Kherson city during its liberation is given a lighthearted twist: for parking poorly, the initial car experiences bad karma. Meanwhile, the song playing in the background is also about the war and specifically features the line “we will soon travel to Kherson”.

While Ukraine has not yet gained back all of the territories which have become occupied, humor can also help Ukrainians make that reality more tangible. In one [TikTok](#) (borderguardmrpl, 2022) by the Mariupol border guard in south-eastern Ukraine, a clip from the movie *Shrek* is used as a metaphor of Ukrainian activity. The TikTok starts with an image of Ukrainian flags overlaid with the caption “Ukraine returning all of its territories to their 1991 borders”. The TikTok then switches to the character Puss in Boots from *Shrek* who is labeled ‘Belgorod’ saying “And maybe [take] me too?” to which the character Donkey, labeled as Ukraine, replies “What? No no no...”. Belgorod is a city in Russia, close to the Ukrainian border. The video continues with Puss in Boots making a cute face, begging to be taken along, to which Donkey concedes “Ok Fine! I’ll take you with me too”. In this reality, Ukraine goes beyond liberating just Ukrainian territories and performs so well that it can free parts of Russia as well, even if reluctantly.

Beyond commenting on the movements of the military, critiquing humor also focuses on social failure in Russia. Three out of four YouTube videos in the sample as well as one TikTok post come from a single Ukrainian comedian, Yuriy Velikiy, whose primary content parodies Russian people and specifically TV personalities or journalists. From a mother who appears clueless as to what her sons are doing in Ukraine, to a satirized Russian propagandist shouting and explaining why his own children are not on the front line, Velikiy emphasizes how on every level of Russian society there is a failure to recognize reality, which will ultimately lead to their defeat. One aspect of this is that, whether because of a culture of complacency or systematically entrenched fear, Russians have not been actively protesting the war. In contrast, Ukrainians have a recent history of anti-government protests. In the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukrainians protested against rigged presidential elections, succeeding when the original election results were annulled. Later, in the 2013 Euromaidan Revolution, Ukrainians fought against the presidential decision to not sign the Association Agreement with the European Union under pressure from Russia. Having developed a culture of resistance, Ukrainians were baffled by Russians’ inability to rise up against Putin’s government. In light of this, humor has been used to express how many Ukrainians have come to feel about Russians. In a [TikTok](#) (logai.arthur, 2022), a man plays out a conversation between a Ukrainian and a Russian:

*Russian: “Excuse me, are you Ukrainian?”*

*Ukrainian: “Yes I’m Ukrainian”*

*Russian: “I’m Russian, a good Russian”*

*Ukrainian: \*alarm sound\**



*Russian: "You know, you inspire me so much with your bravery [bravery is said in Ukrainian with a Russian accent] that I also wanna do that. Tell me, what do I do?"*

*Ukrainian: "Well look, you go to a protest and there you fight for your rights"*

*Russian: \*cricket sounds\**

*Ukrainian: "Ok... you go to a protest, take a bottle and-"*

*Russian: "And sit down?"*

*Ukrainian: "Oh God- you make a Molotov cocktail! And-"*

*Russian: "Ah! Take a shot for bravery like we can, go on!"*

*Ukrainian: "God forgive me, I tried. Go, mobilize, and don't forget a bag."*

*Russian: "For what?"*

*Ukrainian: "You'll become a truly good Russian"*

At the start of the invasion, some Ukrainians made attempts to communicate with Russians, either through their social media platforms or direct family linkages. However, many faced push back or were even cut off, making attempts at communication feel futile. The TikTok at hand emphasizes Russian's apparent inability to understand protests and 'fighting for your rights', as the Russian in the skit would instinctively rather sit down. This is contrasted to Ukrainian's valuing of bravery and unrestrained willingness to fight; framing Russians and Ukrainians are fundamentally different. Ultimately, for Russians' complicit enabling of the war by remaining silent, Ukrainians' critique is scathing. The 'bag' referred to at the end is a body bag, leaving the implication that rather than trying to resist, the Russian should continue to blindly follow orders to mobilize as the only 'truly good' Russian is a dead Russian. There has been significant debate about whether 'good' Russians exist since the start of Russia's invasion. Purportedly, Russians calling themselves good is an attempt to excuse their country's actions without taking accountability.

By critiquing Russia culturally, societally, and militarily, as well as creating contrasts with Ukrainians, Ukrainian humor points out the hypocrisies in the Russian narrative, elevates Ukrainians, and discredits the threat posed by the enemy.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

Having concluded a thematic analysis of 61 posts, the thesis draws four main conclusions about the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion. First, coping and cohesion together manifested as the most widespread functions of humor. Second, sub-

categories of the three primary functions of humor elaborate the means through which the beneficial effects of humor are achieved. Third, in the case of Ukraine, three months passed before humor became a widespread tool for coping, cohesion, and criticism. Finally, TikTok emerged as the primary platform for Ukrainian digital humor.

These findings bear both theoretical and policy implications, elaborating the ways in which humor could be studied in contexts like Russia's invasion and improving understandings of the war. After addressing some limitations of the study, the thesis concludes that humor is a highly nuanced and scientifically valuable part of studying Ukrainian resistance.

#### 4.1 Results

The thesis draws four main conclusions about the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

First, although quantitatively coping manifested as the most widespread function of humor, being present in 50 posts, it was most often encountered alongside themes of cohesion. This implies that coping and cohesion in response to political turmoil are intimately and often subtly interwound. It is almost self-evident why coping emerged as the most common function. First, coping humor in the forms of emotion-based distraction, expression of frustration and exhaustion, and confrontation of fears allowed Ukrainians to relieve stress and reduced the prevalence of negative emotions. Second, coping humor focusing on reminiscing and self-empowerment helped Ukrainians process and face the intense contrast between their old and new reality, by addressing the incongruity of the now and then. While evidently humor on its own would be able insufficient to save people's lives, it does make the day-to-day of political turmoil easier to bear. When the stress-relieving and incongruity-resolving capabilities of humor are further placed in the context of in-group identities, additional functions emerge. Humor has the capacity to unite both in itself and through the topics that it addresses. People can bond by laughing at the same thing, but also because the humor itself highlights the collective nature of experiences. Much of digital Ukrainian humor employed a linguistic 'we' frame, whether in the humor itself or in hashtags. This emphasized humor's importance in an identity-wide sense, implying that as long as some Ukrainians are laughing, then the rest shouldn't give up or cry either. In turn, Ukrainians saw humor as conscious part of their response to and resistance against the invasion.

While the above observations about the functions of humor responding to political turmoil align with extant findings (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Üngör & Verkerke, 2015; Varol, 2014), the way that the results were uncovered adds nuance to the understanding of the means through which humor functions in response to specific needs. By employing thematic discourse analysis, the thesis was able to identify not only whether coping, cohesion, or criticism were achieved through humor, but also provide insight into how and why this was the case. Specifically, by comparing the repeating sets of

meanings, or themes, present in posts, the thesis discovered ten sub-categories of the primary functions of humor. Humor which provided a distraction, helped confront fears, express frustration and exhaustion, reminisce, and empower oneself was found to help Ukrainians process their new reality, and as such serve primarily a coping function. Meanwhile, humor which emphasized unity emerging from humor, shared struggles, or appreciation for Ukraine's unique identity contributed more to cohesion. Finally, humor focusing on satirizing the ridiculousness of Russian culture, as well as Russia's social and military failures since the invasion, served to critique the enemy. By basing analysis on these sub-categories, the process-based and interactive nature of humor, as defined in [1.1](#) (Martin & Ford, 2018) is reflected, as it is possible to focus on the intended message, the form of presentation, and its varying interpretations. While the sub-categories emerged from the specific case of Ukraine, it is possible that thematic discourse analysis in other cases could reveal similar categories, enriching the theoretical foundation of humor's functions in response to political turmoil. Avenues for future research are outlined in [4.3](#).

Third, data collection revealed that humor became a readily employed tool for coping, cohesion, and criticism only after some time had passed from the start of political turmoil. No posts sampled following the specific criteria were from the first three months following Russia's invasion. The majority of sampled posts were posted in autumn of 2022, with the top overall month for posts being November 2022. This finding, along with corroborating the survey results from Xu et al. (2022) – where humor-based coping was not found to be part of Ukrainians' response in the first period of the invasion – may also call for nuance to Galchinsky's (2016) conceptualization of acute laughter. As explained in [3.1](#), this observation does not mean that humor was not used at all for coping, cohesion, or criticism in the first three months following Russia's invasion. Rather, people started using digital humor more, as indicated by the metric of viral engagement, for its functions only in the second half of the year. Consequently, it may prove useful to distinguish between the acute laughter of individuals and groups. The delay in widespread humor use could also be a specific aspect of a full-scale existential war, in contrast to protests which are not as shocking and do not require total societal readaptation. Concurrently, digital trends and, consequently, humor, require time to emerge and gain 'viral' momentum. In part, this could also relate to why criticism was not as common in the sample. The need to criticize and demean Russia was already being met by direct confrontations, sanctions, and international shaming. Instead, priority was placed on maintaining internal cohesion and persevering as the war went on.

Finally, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, TikTok emerged as the most important social media platform for Ukrainian humor, lending to extant findings calling Russia's invasion the first 'TikTok War' (Kleisner & Garney, 2022; Romansky et al., 2022). While SemanticForce accounts for all

social media, most significant engagement took place in TikTok posts. YouTube posts also appeared in the sample, but most came from the same comedian creator who also appeared in the sample on TikTok, speaking more to the creator's popularity rather than the value of YouTube itself. This means that the above findings are primarily generalizable for TikToks. TikTok as a platform lends flexibility of posting all forms and types of humor content (Martin & Ford, 2018): clips from comedy shows, excerpts from live comedy routines, jokes, pranks, and bloopers. Such a variety of options has a two-fold effect: anyone can create and find the kind of content they want. In turn, the video format of this content is attention grabbing, reaching more people in a cumulative effect: the more people interact with a post, the more likely others are to encounter certain types of content as well. Simultaneously, with its targeted, algorithm-based, short-form video content (see [1.3](#)) TikTok can facilitate distraction. The nature of TikTok as a medium, which promotes content based on engagement and trends, and its diverse content options amplify the potential utility of humor for coping, cohesion, and criticism for groups of people.

## 4.2 Theoretical and Policy Implications

The above results have both theoretical and policy implications. Theoretically, this thesis has contributed to academic understandings of humor responding to political turmoil within a new context. As mentioned, specific circumstances make Russia's war unique: a full-scale conflict between a large and smaller power in the time of digital communication technology. By testing the validity of extant theories in application to a new case, this thesis confirms that coping, cohesion, and criticism remain the primary functions of humor responding to political turmoil.

That being said, by developing the sub-categories in [4.1](#) this thesis has also derived the specific means through which these effects are achieved. Future studies looking at similar contexts could reasonably expect similar categories to appear. However, one may criticize this thesis for having an excessive focus on humor, when other elements of Ukrainian resistance could provide better insight into how Ukrainians perceive Russia's invasion. For example, one could explore trends in Ukrainian news headlines on the war to trace how media focuses changed in the first year (Kharchenko, 2022). Alternatively, one could conduct interviews with Ukrainians to get authentic descriptions of their perceptions of and experiences with humor. However, the researcher notes that these studies are not mutually exclusive and could in fact prove to be complementary. Humor's role in Ukrainians' response to the war should not by any means be underestimated because of how much insight it has provided into the diverse experiences of Ukrainians following political turmoil. The present research revealed that indeed Ukrainians consider humor to be an important and valuable part of their response to the war, as it serves as a vehicle to generate will, consolidate the Ukrainian identity, and delegitimize the

enemy. The functions performed by humor do not necessarily happen just through humor.<sup>13</sup> Yet, a unique strength of social media research focusing specifically on humor posts is that it creates insights into the experiences of individuals, by considering the intentions and needs of posters as well as commenters, but also a wider social group, by looking at trends in the sample as a whole. While the results of the thesis are not generalizable to all Ukrainian humor responding to Russia's invasion, due to the nature of SemanticForce sampling as explained in [2.5](#), it is likely that the thesis has uncovered the main functions of humor as it manifested on TikTok. Despite being just one part of the puzzle, it is undoubtedly an important one.

Meanwhile, in relation to policies responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this thesis has contributed to experts' understanding of Ukrainians' experiences in the war as well as their needs, and how these could be met. For example, the nature of critiquing humor reveals that Ukrainians relate to representations of Russians as culturally incompetent, having failed both socially and militarily. Criticisms are harsh, but not without merit given the hypocrisies in the Russian strategic narrative which Ukrainian humor points out. As the war has continued, some Western officials and commentators have called Ukraine to negotiate with Russia, potentially offering territory-based concessions to bring an end to the conflict. Humor provides an insight into why most Ukrainians steadfastly resist such propositions: Ukraine is determined to regain all territories and will not appease an enemy. Understanding this as a value held on a societal basis, beyond the strategic narrative promoted by the government, could change the approach of allies who encourage Ukraine to enter negotiations or take the 'diplomatic route'. Still, this thesis acknowledges that humor poses a danger: it can entrench biases to such an extent that alternative social realities (like possibilities for negotiation) become difficult to imagine (Svatoňová, 2023). The in-group-based pressures created by humor further coerce individuals to adhere to certain views, lest they be ousted (Deibert, 2019). As such, this thesis emphasizes that being able to navigate and dissect the media landscape in the wake of Russia's invasion is essential for understanding the current and future dynamics of conflict. From the TikTok accounts of soldiers and official Ukrainian agencies, one can learn about the elements which contribute to Ukraine's overarching narrative: Ukrainians remain brave and defiant in the face of an existential threat and will do whatever it takes for victory (Mankoff, 2022; Romansky et al., 2022). As the war continues, observing changes in the themes and sentiments conveyed through social media could provide preemptive insight into how Ukraine's narrative may change as well, responding to the needs of the Ukrainian population.

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<sup>13</sup> Crying and mourning also offer release, participation in cultural events strengthens in-group cohesion, while naming and shaming through diplomatic channels can delegitimize an enemy (Lopatovska et al., 2022)

### 4.3 Future research

The research design of the thesis at hand, both with data collection through SemanticForce and thematic discourse analysis, forms a convenient template for future research. As Ukraine's resistance against Russia continues for the foreseeable future, and the initial shock of the war settles, it is likely that the humor responding to political turmoil will also change, as described by Galchinsky (2016). This is especially true as with time it becomes more difficult to maintain morale in brutal and protracted conflict, perhaps elevating or relegating the importance of humor (Romansky, et al., 2022). Consequently, similar research can be conducted, simply within different timeframes, to chronicle the ways in which Ukrainians' needs for coping, cohesion, and criticism (will) change. Ultimately, this could produce a culturally intimate longitudinal data set of Ukrainian digital humor which, in retrospect, could help clarify why Ukrainians responded to certain events in specific ways. To deepen understandings of Ukrainian humor following Russia's invasion, the foundation established by this thesis could be supplemented both by other qualitative and quantitative methods. The researcher, while being Ukrainian, is just one person who has implicit biases of interpretation. To verify whether interpretations have been valid, studies could be conducted with Ukrainians, whether through interviews or surveys, to gain insight into their experiences with humor as a tool for coping, cohesion, and criticism. Simultaneously, more 'big picture' quantitative studies could attempt to create a visual of the popularity of certain themes and humor since the beginning of the invasion, whether by focusing once more on engagement as a metric or on content through language processing. Given these possibilities, humor as a frame of conflict analysis should not be underestimated.

### 4.4 Conclusion

The thesis at hand started with the observation that humor became a commonly noted, but understudied, part of Ukrainians' response to Russia's full-scale invasion. In turn, the inquiry of this thesis confronted two puzzles. The first one focused on a conceptual tension: humor, something seemingly antithetical to the seriousness of war, appeared to play a role in conflict. The second one was case specific: as a new and urgent event in IR, the specific dynamics of Russia's invasion must have shaped the humor emerging from it. As such, the thesis posed the research question: *What were the functions of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?* To answer the research question, [Chapter 1](#) consolidated a conceptual framework, tracing literature which clarified the theories and definition, functions, and forms of humor. The conceptual framework clarified that, in the context of political turmoil, coping, cohesion, and criticism consistently emerge as the primary functions of humor. Subsequently, [Chapter 2](#) developed data collection and analysis methods which allowed the thesis to gain an overview of digital Ukrainian humor in the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion. The implementation of SemanticForce to draw a sample of 61 social media

posts, and their study through thematic discourse analysis allowed the thesis to focus on the recurring sets of meaning found with the humorous artifacts. [Chapter 3](#) presents the findings: coping, cohesion, and criticism were present as functions of digital Ukrainian humor. Yet, beyond this, the thesis also uncovered ten sub-categories of functions which elaborate the different ways in which coping, cohesion, and criticism were achieved, clarifying why and how humor was used in Ukraine as a specific case. [Chapter 4](#), explains the significance of these findings, also confirming Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a 'TikTok War', signifying that future research should not discredit the potential and actual impact of social media platforms. Ultimately, the thesis' findings bear both theoretical and policy implications.

Humor as a response to political turmoil should by no means be disregarded as unserious and irrelevant. Instead, humor should be appreciated for what it is: a funny yet complex and fascinating aspects of people's interactions with their social reality. Upon further inspection, humor facilitates researchers' enhanced understanding of conflict, by showcasing people's needs as well as their means of trying to meet these needs when faced with an existential threat. This thesis confirms that the response of Ukrainians to Russia's full-scale invasion is no different. Future research exploring other instances of humor responding to political turmoil can employ this thesis' methods for comparative or longitudinal analyses. As of now, for the case of Ukraine, one thing is clear: #We'reLaughingSoWe'reNotGivingUp is not just a humorous hashtag, it is part of a highly nuanced and conscious part of Ukrainian resistance and social resilience.

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ГОВОРИТЬ ВЕЛИКИЙ ЛЬВІВ (Director). (2022, November 13). *Навіть перед боєм наші захисники*

*не втрачають почуття гумору.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9k5dsGi3Phs>

## 6 Appendices

### 6.1 Appendix 1a (Original SemanticForce Search Query Input)

гумор, гумор\*, юмор, юмор\*, #гумор, #юмор, мем\*, мем\*, мэм\*, мем, #мем, #мэм, #мем, мема, мема, мэма, мему, мему, мэму, мемі, мемі, мэме, меме, мемом, мемом, мэмом, мемчик, мемчик, мэмчик, мемні, мемні, мэмные, мемные, мемних, мемних, мэмных, мемных, мемними, мемними, мэмным, мемным, мемним, мемним, мэмными, мемными, мемний, мемний, мэмный, мемный, мемного, мемного, мэмном, мемном, мемному, мемному, мэмному, мемна, мемна, мэмная, мемная, мемної, мемної, мэмной, мемной, мемній, мемній, мемною, мемною, мемос, мемос, мэмос, пародія, парод\*, пародия, #пародія, #пародия, смішно, смішн\*, смешно, смешн\*, розсміш\*, рассмеш\*, сміял\*, смеял\*, насміши\*, насмеш\*, жарт, жарт\*, шутка, шутк\*, #жарт, #шутка, жартувати, шутит, жарти, шутки, прікол, прікол\*, прикол, прикол\*, #прікол, #прикол, ржака, ржач\*

*Translation:* humor, meme (+conjugations), parody, funny, (to) joke, hilarious

українськийгумор, українськийгумор\*, украинскийюмор, украинскийюмор\*, #українськийгумор, #украинскийюмор, сміємосьотженездаємось, #сміємосьотженездаємось, щобнеплакатьсясміялась, #щобнеплакатьсясміялась, щобнеплакатиясміялась, #щобнеплакатиясміялась, щобнеплакатимисміялись, #щобнеплакатимисміялись, гуморукраїнською, #гуморукраїнською, гуморнашевсе, #гуморнашевсе

*Translation:* Ukrainian humor, We're laughing so we're not giving up, (I/we) laughed so that (I/we) wouldn't cry, Humor in Ukrainian, Humor is our everything

### 6.2 Appendix 1b (Additional SemanticForce Search Query Input)

#путінхуйло, #героямслава, #славаукраїні, #всебудеукраїна, #мипереможемо, #українапереможе, #українаєдина, #славанації, #іпіздецьросійськійфедерації, #льолік #льолікприколи, #льолікуа, #ЗСУ,

*Translation:* Putin is a d\*ck, Glory to the Heroes, Glory to Ukraine, All will be Ukraine, We will win, Ukraine will win, Ukraine is united, Glory to the nation, And f\*ck the Russian federation,<sup>14</sup> LOL (forms), AFU (Armed Forces of Ukraine)

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<sup>14</sup> Prior two hashtags always used in tandem as two parts of a rhyme.

### 6.3 Appendix 2 (Sample Post from Thematic Analysis Table)

Sample post from thematic analysis table				
Date	Platform	Engagement	Observations	Link
2022-10-12	TikTok	6.3m views, 588.1k likes, 5.3k comments  [same post on #3 with 3.7m views]	<p>Caption/Post Description: Bloopers in the Ukrainian United News telethon.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone enters on screen and trips, falling down while a screen behind them reads “United News, Together We Are Strong”</li> <li>News anchor adjusting jacket without realizing he is being filmed</li> <li>One sign language interpreter moves, revealing another translator sitting awkwardly behind her</li> <li>Reporter queuing out a news segment and announces the wrong division of the United News after which he swears “Oh f*ck, it’s all regions!”</li> <li>News anchor announcing an exclusive interview with the Honorary Consul of Ukraine in Guinea completely mispronounces the name, prompting laughter from others in the studio. The News anchor next to him fails to hold in a laugh as the camera pans to her.</li> <li>Voice over footage “America will come to help, so promised the U.S. President, Donald Biden. Sh*t. So promised the U.S. President, Joe Biden”</li> <li>“The United States of Ukraine... [pauses] The United States of America, apologies”</li> </ul> <p>Relatable unintentional humor. Explicitly shared as humorous content. Recognition of mistakes (reporters themselves laughing). Incongruity of mistakes and errors in light of responsibility of providing accurate information and professional tone. Mistakes can be made by anyone and everyone is still adjusting to this new situation, so it is ok if you make mistakes as well.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comments repeating the parts or phrases they found funny</li> </ul> <p>#bloopers #UnitedNews #humor #we’re laughing so we’re not giving up</p>	<p><a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@alina.vasylieva/video/7153627462516133125?lang=en">https://www.tiktok.com/@alina.vasylieva/video/7153627462516133125?lang=en</a></p> <p>@alina.vasylieva Account posts other clips from the war, mostly of Zelenskyy, 90.7k followers</p>