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Networked masterplots

Music, pro-Russian sentiment, and participatory propaganda on TikTok

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Abstract

This article investigates engagement with propagandist TikTok videos shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, with particular attention to the role of music and comments. By repurposing the infrastructure of TikTok sound-linking, our research upholds sensitivity to how this infrastructure enables affective and participatory workings of propaganda. We develop the notion of networked masterplots based on a situated analysis of how a specific sound, occasionally used in combination with pro-Russian hashtags, prescribes the creation of replicable linkages between three distinct video templates. The analysed templates, as we will show, not only intentionally share the use of the same song but adapt the theatrical effect of situation and suspense on the textual level of "stickers" or messages overlaid on top of videos. A selection of fifteen videos using the stickers – "What if they attack?", "I am wondering how many will (un)subscribe?", and "I am (not) ashamed" – in combination with a techno remix of the Soviet folk song Katyusha will be at the centre of our investigation. Arguing that in Katyusha videos situation and suspense are indivisible, we pay attention to the audiencing practices as they extend into both video comment sections and further memetic spin-offs. We conclude by reflecting on how TikTok sharing not only facilitates self-expression and social activism but also enables the weaponization of content within networked memetic environments.

Keywords: participatory propaganda; digital methods; networked masterplots; affect; soundscapes

1. Introduction

Drawing on the notion of affective affordances (Hautea et al., 2022), this article examines pro-Russian war propaganda on TikTok, a platform crucial in mediating the ongoing full-scale military invasion of Ukraine since February 2022. Propaganda takes on various forms, but within the scope of our research it is best defined in its capacity "to manipulate public opinion by activating strong emotions, simplifying ideas and information, attacking opponents, and responding to the deepest hopes, fears, and dreams of its target audiences" (Hobbs, 2020, p. 5; Luckert & Bachrach, 2009). As engaging action possibilities that

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rely on technological forms (Hutchby, 2001; Tiidenberg & Siiback, 2018), affective affordances of social media mobilise publics that are steered through both shared sentiment (Papacharissi, 2014) and platform materialities (Geboers, 2022). It is our premise that contemporary forms of propaganda on TikTok tap into these relations, creating complex participatory environments amidst currently 'happening' trends.

To effectively capture user attention in these environments, propagandist messages attune themselves to TikTok's multi-modal features (Hautea et al., 2022). By repurposing the engaging infrastructure of sound-linking (Pilipets, 2023), our research upholds sensitivity to how this infrastructure gives rise to what Boler and Davis (2021) call 'propaganda by other means'. Contingent on participation, propaganda by means of TikTok sharing encompasses networked video performances circulating in a decentralised fashion. Musical sound as the carrier and amplifier of affect (Lucier, 1995; Hennion, 2015) here serves as the main searchable template and networker, allowing us to approach TikTok content in "its capacity to propagate, move and be moved" (Kahn, 2009, p. 26). Centering on the reverberations of music across videos and comment sections, we explore how TikTok's "use this sound" button allows content creators to circulate complex affect-laden messages of varying tonalities. Our analysis shows that TikTok sharing not only facilitates self-expression and social activism but also enables strategic injections of content, weaponized to amplify nationalist sentiments within networked memetic environments.

The overarching question guiding our research is: How do the affective affordances of TikTok shape pro-Russian war propaganda? We present a case study using methods tailored to TikTok's performative and memetic nature. The case study consists of three video templates – each demonstrating specific aesthetic choices and attention-grabbing techniques (Abidin & Kaye, 2021) – that we conceptualise as networked masterplots. The analysed plots, as we will show, not only intentionally share the use of the same song but emerge through imitation on the textual level of "stickers", or messages overlaid on top of videos. A selection of fifteen pro-Russian videos using the stickers – "What if they attack?", "I am wondering how many will (un)subscribe?", and "I am (not) ashamed" – in combination with a techno remix of the Soviet folk song Katyusha will be at the centre of our investigation. The remix turns a nostalgic 'sound from the past' into a catchy techno beat, targeting users' sense of collective belonging through a masterplot that is "co-constructed, stripped-down (skeletal), and thus easily shareable and adaptable" (Mäkelä, 2021, p. 51).

To explore the affective pathways extending the propagandist message, our research traces resonances and dissonances evident in both video performances and interactions in the comment sections. We approach the latter through quali-quantitative methods attuned to the repetitive nature of users' shoutouts and the default visibility of comments with replies. We then make three arguments: First, TikTok's multi-layered affective affordances and networked features prioritise embodied performances that go beyond 'mere' persuasion, focusing on the bonding potential instead. Second, all three masterplots tap into a theatrical mode of 'situation and suspense' (Wang & Suthers, 2022), the suspense dissolves so as to inspire video appropriations and user alignments in the comment sections. Third, by fostering the practices of imitation through commenting, Katyusha TikToks not only make memetic content grow "sticky" (Ahmed, 2004) with affirmative associations of love (for the nation) but also foster collective imaginaries of war and peace.

3.1 Propaganda music and its dual function on TikTok

The choice for sound as the primary step in our exploration not only derives from the platform's logic of content creation, but it also acknowledges music's affective impact and its historical role in propaganda (Thompson & Biddle, 2013). Katyusha, composed in 1938 by Matvey Blanter, owes its lyrics to the Soviet poet Mikhail Isakovsky. An ode to soldiers fighting afar for the Motherland, this song has been part of the Soviet national identity ever since its composition (Polyudova, 2016). 'Techno-Katyusha' can be regarded as a TikTok-modulated attempt to instrumentalise post-Soviet nostalgia, perpetuating love for the nation in the envisioned target audience. The techno beat, designed to fit TikTok's obsession with

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catchy dance challenges, supposedly smoothens the path to engagement with Katyusha's main affective cue: a shared sense of pride that unites 'the nation'.

Alongside its affordance as affective mediator, music on TikTok is also a networker and, in this role, it is highly templatable. Building on Abidin and Kaye's (2021) understanding of "templatability", we explore how a sound template prescribes the creation of replicable linkages between different layers of platform engagement. Aural linkages created through replicating someone else's sound can intersect with other layers of expression that reinforce the circulation of multi-modal templates: TikTok video effects, hashtags, and overlaid stickers, among other elements, add a certain consistency to users' performances. As our research material indicates, the expressive elements of Katyusha videos, including the patterns outlined in the sticker text, are crafted to seamlessly blend into targeted audiences. The resulting networked masterplots abide by the 'dictates' of memetic adaptability (Treem & Leonardi, 2021): they tap into an affect that is recognizable and replicable.

As short-form videos are largely theatrical, theatre theories used in the ontology of performative activities (Wang & Suthers, 2022) prove helpful, both for describing our memetic templates, and for assessing the processes of imitation and repetition they evoke. Approached as networked masterplots, memetic content formations are characterised by their capacity to follow a "skeletal blueprint" (Mäkelä, 2021) that sets up a theatrical mode of situation and suspense. 'Situation' is a flexible setting that is established by TikTok performances, it is "a context or a circumstance" (Wang & Suthers, 2022, p. 313), which can be demarcated by sounds, hashtags, embodied gestures, and emojis. 'Suspense' builds up as a continuation of the situation, "it shows the twists of the story, or the punchline" (ibid.), which can be dissolved by means of reassurance or affirmation, and prolonged by way of reversing or reinstalling the situation. In Katyusha videos, situation and suspense are indivisible, extending both into further memetic spin-offs and into commenting practices driven by users' competing affective investments. Some would engage based on their desire to belong, others would contest the masterplot, signalling discontent.

Our analytical framework thus derives from the premise that memetic masterplots networked through sound become sticky with affect through subsequent circulation. For Sara Ahmed, stickiness takes "a form of relationality, or a 'withness', in which the elements that are 'with' get bound together" (ibid.: 91). Words, for example, stick because they become attached through affects that do not "reside positively in signs" (ibid. 60), but circulate and move between objects, signs, and bodies. Videos networked via aural linkages become even more sticky through combinations of modalities, such as those seen in the pro-Russian masterplots where both the song as well as the sticker texts constitute the template. While some room is left open for 'original' embodied performances, the propagandist messages perpetuated in video adaptations of Katyusha are meant to be (almost identically) repeated, which involves a certain extent of resonance through "audiencing" (Fiske, 1994; Rose, 2023) in the comment sections.

Writing about affect and social media, Susanna Paasonen (2019) reflects on how resonance as an "intensification and prolongation of sound, especially of a musical tone" (p. 49) can be understood as a "quality of evoking response" (ibid.). A sound attuned to a memetic masterplot may add a specific affective trajectory to a formation of TikTok content, which does not mean, however, that it will automatically result in shared sentiment. This gives rise to questions of alignment, resonance and dissonance as "the edge necessary for online content to grab attention […] owes to the affective intensities it engenders, whether these are sensed as pleasant, offensive, or blatantly disturbing" (ibid, p. 60). TikTok imitation publics (Zulli & Zulli, 2022), while aiming to lure in engagement with the same memetic masterplots, do not exclude boundary work or affective contestation. As sounds catch on and users respond with novel adaptations of the template: "positive, negative, and ambivalent affect blend into each other" (Paasonen, 2019, p. 52), initiating various trajectories of response. Aiming to dampen possible interventions, Katyusha masterplots are designed to strengthen the bonds between certain audiences – a strategy that extends into commenting practices reiterating the same or similar message.

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3.2 Methods: navigating soundscapes, uncovering masterplots, mapping resonances

The methods outlined below comprise two steps: firstly, detecting templates within the specific TikTok 'soundscape' of Katyusha, and secondly, performing a word pair analysis of comment sections to evaluate the reverberations of the propagandist message. To conduct our study, we combine a data-intensive digital methods approach (Romele & Furia, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2016; Rogers, 2019) with aspects of the walkthrough method and multimodal analysis as proposed by Light et al. (2018). A soundscape, as we approach it by leaning into TikTok's music indexing logic, foregrounds audio as the main memetic stratifier, opening up different paths for navigating TikTok content via additional expressive linkages such as hashtags or effects. Paying attention to these linkages accessible at the level of TikTok infrastructure, we repurpose the sound to demarcate videos that use the same Katyusha remix, asking: Which other platform features came to the fore in these video performances? Which memetic associations were at play? And, most importantly in light of the participatory nature of propaganda on TikTok, which resonances with Katyusha emerged through user engagement in the comment sections?

3.2.1 Navigating soundscapes

From a pool of 1,938 videos utilising the Katyusha remix, our choice of fifteen videos reflects the frequent use of three different sticker templates, each represented by the five most commented videos. Because listed (and thus easily searchable) sounds from the TikTok-embedded sound library go hand in hand with reworkings and spin-offs, also known as 'original sounds', audio artefacts contain disguised templates, which are not easily accessible through keywords. Sensitive to the contextual nuance of associated sharing possibilities, our methods benefit from systematically exploring the TikTok interface, including immersive walkthroughs across the original sounds that were frequently appearing together with pro-Russian hashtags including #россия🇷🇺 (Russia), #мненестыдно ("I'm not ashamed"), and #zанаших ("For our boys"). These connections not only hold analytical relevance for meme detection in that they script the associated masterplots, but also generate metadata – time of publication, effects, co-hashtags, etc. – intertwining in the streams of platform-distributed content, which we scraped using the Digital Methods Initiative's browser tool 'Zeeschuimer' (Peeters, 2021).

The decision to focus on the most commented videos is both ethically and analytically grounded in our exploration of propaganda audiencing. In line with John Fiske's (1994) insights (see also Rose, 2023, p. 60), we understand the processes by which visual (propaganda) messages have their meanings amplified or renegotiated as contextual and contingent upon the spaces that structure participation. Analysing propagandist messages and their memetic spin-offs in conjunction with user comments, we position associated acts of digital amplification as sites of ethical and rhetorical decision-making (Phillips, 2018; Bradshaw, 2020). Toxic injections of pro-Russian war propaganda embedded in the networks of the three studied masterplots – for simplicity, we will refer to these templates as 'attacked', 'subscribed', and 'ashamed' – call attention to the questions of positionality, literacy, and "slow circulation" (Bradshaw, 2018). The latter, as we suggest elsewhere, also requires 'taking the oxygen out of the meme' (Pilipets & Geboers, 2024 forthcoming) through methods that both visually and rhetorically counteract the sensationalist language of 'debunking' inherent in online environments.

3.2.2 Uncovering masterplots

With particular attention to the attitudes inscribed in the videos themselves and their reverberations in the comment sections, a focused visual exploration of memetic masterplots has been performed by grouping a selection of the five most commented videos per sticker template in Figure 1. Within each of the templates, we conduct a multimodal video analysis under consideration of both engagement metrics and (where applicable) co-hashtags, which in their general address evade targeted searchability but reveal content creators' "post-based virality ambitions" (Abidin, 2021). Co-hashtags such as #fyp ('for you page') or #lukashenko #putin #kadyrov, which either indicate desired visibility or demarcate associated audiences help us to interpret the propagandist circulation strategies. Reflecting on the potential

amplification, we do not reproduce the exact title of the Katyusha remix as it has little relevance in terms of understanding the workings of propaganda. We also do not reproduce the performers' handles, as this information clearly would draw unnecessary attention to individual users, whose faces we de-identified. The translated sticker messages and associated performances, however, are left visible as they both require critical deconstruction through visual analysis and point us to the affective charge of the masterplots without additionally enhancing their traceability.

The visual technique of montage, initially introduced by Lev Manovich (2009), combines the sequential narrative of video storyboards with their spatial organisation via the Katyusha remix and accompanying stickers. Providing an analytical overview across each of the resulting masterplots, the sequential narrative translates into a series of movements and bodily gestures displayed side by side in a series of deconstructed video frames. The spatial arrangement allows researchers to navigate across the soundscape of Katyusha, revealing memetic linkages between the videos through stickers, which underpin the theatrical effect of 'situation and suspense' (Wang & Suthers, 2022). On the one hand, as we discuss below, such analytical devices offer a means of simultaneous close-looking and cross-reading. They are 'metapictures' framed in a manner of display that enables critical reflection on them (Rogers, 2021; Mitchell, 1994). On the other hand, and in line with Jonathan Bradshaw's proposition (2020), we suggest that these techniques help social media scholars to "counter malicious accumulative strategies with rhetorical specificity, and to encourage an ethics of self-care among audiences" (p.3).

3.2.3 Mapping resonances

For cross-reading the audiencing dynamics in the comment sections of fifteen videos representing the three templates, we used the TK_Comment Exporter tool (2023) to output a total of 49.750 comments, of which 7.312 were interactive comments and 42.438 were simple shoutouts or comments without replies. Different types of comments come with different communicative dynamics, which requires methodological sensitivity to the patterns emerging either through conversational means or through imitation. Before delving into the comments that garnered the most attention based on replies, we examine users' alignments with video content, observed through "sticky words" (Ahmed, 2004) or word-emoji pairs extracted from shoutouts (see Figure 2). Methodologically, we treat word pairs as "memetic formulas" (Hagen & Venturini, 2023) or indicators of participatory amplification through frequent repetition of words extending into phrases, which we extracted from our translated text corpus using Bernhard Rieder's (2015) TextAnalysis tool.

Mapping out the intensities with which particular words appear together in response to the three memetic masterplots, we reflect on the study of comment sections as entry points into the affective resonances evoked by memes. Driving the interactive dynamics of online audiencing, comments in general and emojis, in particular, have been conceptualised not only as objects of cultural contestation but also as conduits for affective investment (Stark & Crawford, 2015; Boutet et al., 2021). The role of emojis in the comment sections is known to be contingent upon many contextual factors, including the social and cultural context in which an emoji is encountered, the bodily sensations it evokes and represents, and the meanings and associations it carries (Paasonen, 2015). With users shouting out past one another, emojis help us to trace the spikes of affective intensity that draw boundaries on certain trajectories and register through collective imitation rather than through engagement metrics. Conceptually, this allows us to access stickiness as defined by word-emoji combinations that stand out as affective amplifiers in that they are tied together through frequent, almost ritualistic, use (see Figure 3).

3.3 Networked masterplots: situation and suspense in propaganda memes

The 'fixed' elements of Katyusha masterplots fulfil varied but overlapping functions. While the videos invite potential replicators and commenters to engage with the message in a straightforward 'call-out fashion', the song is able to engage in more affective (non-cognitive) ways. It serves to aid affective intensities that establish momentary connections through audiences' envisioned attunement to 'the right

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frequency' (Paasonen, 2019). The upbeat version of a folklore song that has collapsed with Russian identity and memory 'sets the affective scene' for the masterplots to (potentially) thrive.

3.3.1 Enticing response

Bridging platform functions with envisioned engagement, affective affordances emerge on the content level and on the level of the post's *audiencing* (Wang & Suthers, 2022). The analysed templates rely on 1) the techno-remix of Katyusha, and 2) the 'sticker-articulated' mode of situation and suspense, dissolving as the video performances reach their climax.

Figure 1

Figure 1 displays deidentified frames from the five most commented videos within each of the three templates. The metrics refer to the total number of comments and likes per video. What is striking about these numbers is how quickly these were amassed, given that the videos were published mere days before TikTok got severely restricted by the so-called Splinternet, meaning that people located within Russia stopped being able to access unrestricted feeds when not using a VPN.

Unlike binge-watching, where suspense keeps viewers hooked, in this context, it's the resolution of suspense that prompts the audience to engage and react. In Katyusha videos, situation and suspense are created with the aid of *content-level* affordances: the text stickers, the video effects, the hashtags, the sound, they all pertain to a highly dense expressive ensemble that sets up the stage for the propagandist message. The capacity of the message to entice response then unfolds across different trajectories of audiencing as it registers through imitation, renegotiation, or rejection.

In the memetic setting of the first Katyusha template, a sticker text stating in Russian "I am afraid: What if they attack?" demarcates the situation that extends into suspense through the embodied gesture of folding hands in a prayer-like fashion. When the performance is interrupted by a flashy video effect, allowing for the magical appearance of Putin, Kadyrov, and Lukashenko (or variations of these figures), suspense dissolves and the accompanying sticker text reads: "They will not attack". The resulting composition combines two propaganda temporalities: one of anxiety and one of affirmation. The first scene represents the anxious present and the next adds an imaginary twist to this present in which staged fear becomes obsolete.

Inverting the logic of 'predictive projection', the 'attacked' template reenacts what Finnin and Roozenbek (2022) have described as a characteristic reflection of the Kremlin's own intentions "based on what it says others will do first". Through a unified use of background effects, video stickers, and music, this template sets up a stage for the narrative propagated by Putin's government since the war's outset. The main message it conveys aligns with the Soviet imagination of an imminent Western threat, asserting: 'We' must attack first in order to prevent 'them' from even trying. By installing Putin's 'protective' figure in the middle of the frame, the plot resolves anxious anticipation in a series of adaptations sharing the same performative pattern.

By contrast, the second template (Subscribed) shares 'merely' the song and the sticker text. The absence of the video effect as an orchestrator of performance opens up the performative setting to seemingly unrelated adaptations, including a train journey to Moscow, soldiers with heavy armour, a living room, and a snowy playground. The first scene establishes suspense by asking: *"I wonder how many people will unsubscribe when they find out I'm from Russia?"*. The second scene increases tension as the sticker switches to the question *"And how many will subscribe?"* This interactive masterplot pertains to a tactic of audience instalment, where the revelation of national belonging extends into the video comment sections, inviting for the alignment of like-minded others. This template is clearly affirmation-seeking or inviting support through counter-imitation: "On the contrary, I will subscribe."

The design of the third memetic plot is similar to the second, in that it emerges via the shared song and a sticker text. Here the text in the first scene generates suspense by suggesting *"You are probably ashamed that you are from Russia?"*. The situation is set and the alleged attribution of shame amplifies the suspense. In the second scene, the suspense dissolves as the audience finds out how the performer is anything but ashamed, which is visually amplified in various ways: Some videos zoom in on the act of throwing away one's Ukrainian passport (and keeping the Russian), others involve the middle finger performed next to Putin engaged in the same dubious gesture.

The fact that all three memetic masterplots tap into the pattern of 'situation and suspense' (Wang & Suthers, 2022) invites critical reflection of the affective means through which pro-Russian propaganda is staged. Suspense builds up as a continuation of the situation, rhetorically questioning the audience's (imagined) stance: Should 'I' be afraid or ashamed, do 'I' still 'belong' or should 'I' unsubscribe? The punchline in the video stickers dissolves suspense almost instantaneously by means of counterimitation: afraid-not afraid, subscribed-unsubscribed, ashamed-not ashamed. However, these theatrical strategies are not solely accountable for the memetic potential of the plots, as it extends into other layers of expression through embodied gestures and TikTok-native content-linking strategies. The plot attunes the audience through music as it dissolves suspense, debunking possible affective alignments with negative affects. What captures attention is the desire for affirmation shared across all performances, which entices different responses. This undergirds how propaganda by means of TikTok sharing is not necessarily about

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straightforward ideological persuasion, but rather about the affective contours of signalling belonging: in- and outgroups come together through adaptation and reversal of the same messages extending into novel video performances and comments.

3.4 Audiencing: Sticky words, memetic formulas, and interactive comments

In this section, we demonstrate how two different types of comments – whether they frequently repeat as the so-called shoutouts without sparking any discussion or provoke further engagement through likes and replies – operate as prolongations of memetic masterplots across different affective trajectories.

3.4.1 Affective reverberations through emojified shoutouts

In the comment sections of fifteen videos representing the masterplots, the incongruences between the first and the last two templates can be observed in the patterns emerging from the use of frequently occurring word pairs or "sticky words" (Ahmed, 2004). The intensity with which specific words repeat together indicates the weight of co-word alignments. These alignments, in turn, generate phrases, extending into "memetic formulas" (Venturini and Hagen, 2023) analysed in Figure 2. To identify such formulas we looked for both words and emojis and, where applicable, included longer phrases (e.g., "On the contrary, I will subscribe" instead of "contrary subscribe" or "🇷🇺+🇺🇦=" instead of "🇷🇺🇺🇦"). Analytically, this allows us to access stickiness as defined by how words and signs work in relation to one another, creating affective ties that vary in their stance and intensity.

The rhythms of commenting rendered visible through patterns of repetition in the most frequently occurring formulas, register through iteration of the same message in response to video content rather than through conversation between users. The matrix in Figure 2 translates these rhythms into colour intensities using the logic of a heat map. Blue tones indicate the minimum of two, and red tones the maximum of 624 co-occurring word sequences within a video comment section. The persistence in the language of affirmative shoutouts "Glory to Russia", "Russia top", and "Russia is power" running through the second and the third templates testifies to the overall patriotic stance of the comments and video performances alike. The dominant shared pattern here is clearly that of the affirmation of Russian authority, which takes a slightly different shape in the first template due to the specificity of video design and commentators' preoccupation with the use of visual effects and requests to "make a tutorial".

The use of emojis, at the same time, connects the comments in all three templates, shifting the analysis towards the question of "sticky signs" (Ahmed, 2004) and their role in the increase of affective value invested in online-mediated expressions of belonging. Here, Katyusha's nostalgic sentiment and users' comments produce a reciprocal feedback loop where the videos' ability to provoke affective response enacts literal acts of imitation. Through repetition and combination, as our analysis suggests, emojis become "saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" (ibid., p. 11). The alignment of different emojis appearing in the same comment, therefore, comes with a certain extent of amplification. For example, emojis ❤️🇷🇺 and 🇷🇺💪 tied together to communicate the ideals of strength and love for the nation were used on repeat in reaction to videos shaming those who had unsubscribed (template two) and glorifying those who are not ashamed to be Russian (template three). The main function of both is to create a sense of belonging to a particular community as well as a sense of pressure to conform to its norms and values. In the second template posing the question "I am wondering how many would unsubscribe if they knew that I am from Russia?", this pressure becomes evident in the intense reposting of one-liners such as "signed up 🥰" and "On the contrary, I will subscribe", the latter being the most used shoutout across all comment sections.

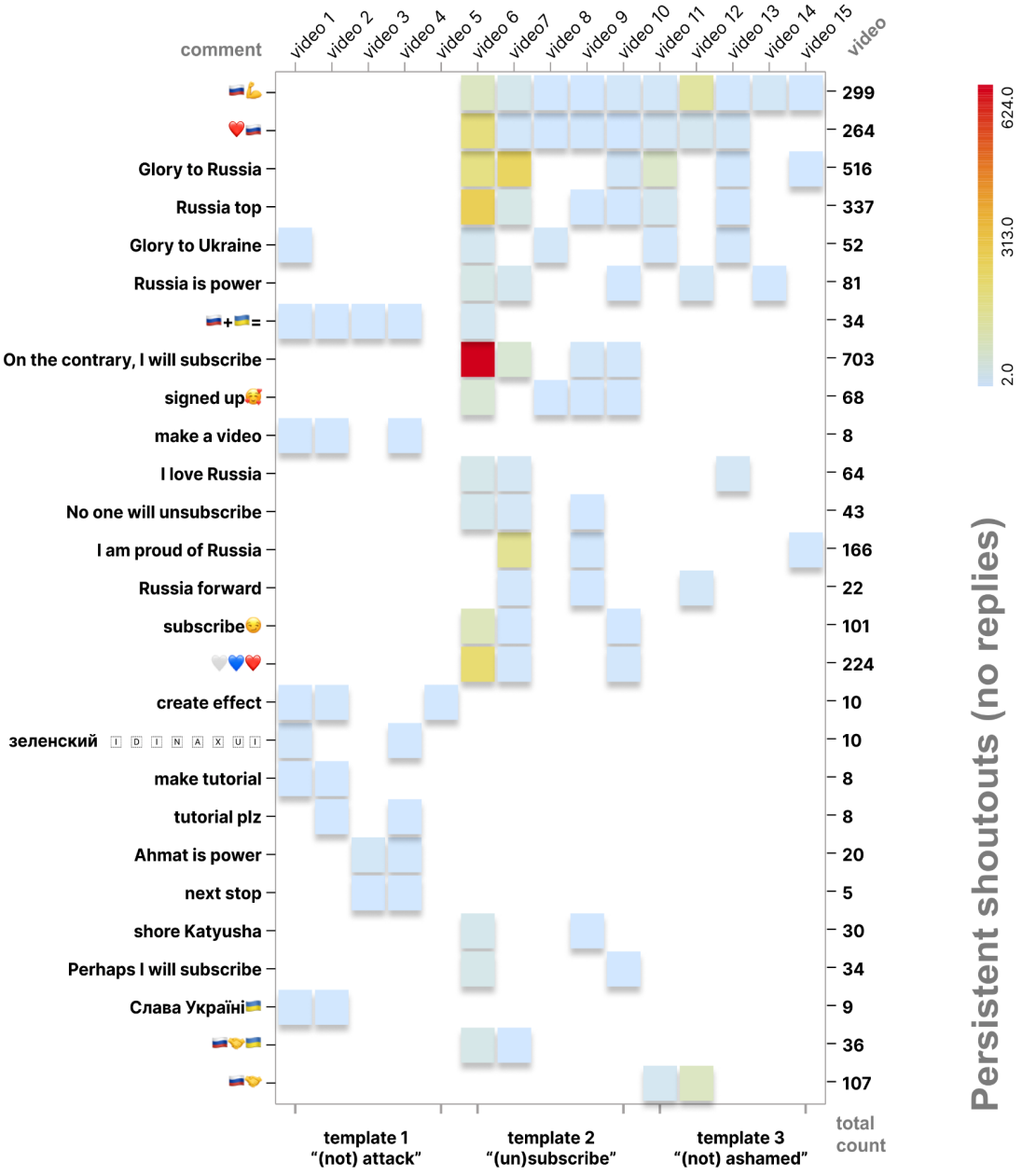

Figure 2

A matrix visualising the distribution of word pairs extracted from a total of 42.438 top-level comments without replies across fifteen video comment sections. The total count (on the right) represents the absolute number of posts a word pair appears in. The order of the videos on the x-axis represents three templates. The order of word pairs on the y-axis represents the extent of their persistence across video comment sections.

In the comments of the first template "What if they attack?", the idea of shared national pride took an even more cynical trajectory in the use of emojis combining the national flags of Russia and Ukraine. The resulting equation "🇷🇺+🇺🇦=" targeted at the unification of national attachments strives to create an effect of a collective coherence shortly after Russia declared the beginning of the so-called "special military operation". The alleged purpose of the operation is well documented, and the use of the equation

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in the replies to content creators celebrating Putin, Lukashenko, and Kadyrov as the great protectors of Russian national unity is hardly accidental. According to the official address by the President of the Russian Federation from 24 February 2022, the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine – or the "special military operation" – has been triggered to solely "protect the people" in the Russian-speaking Ukrainian regions who "for eight years […] have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime" (Kremlin.ru, 2022). This language is quite remarkable, not only because it plays down the enormous dimensions of suffering that the war continues to cause, but especially because its main message is that of cultural assimilation explicated by the equations' simple solution: "🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺" (see figure 3).

Date	♡	Comment	Translation
2022-02-27 07:34:57	2	🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🤝❤️	🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🤝❤️
2022-02-27 10:30:00	3	КАДЫРОВ МОЩЬ 😎🤘 Я ЗА МИР 🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	KADYROV POWER😎🤘 I'm for peace 🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺
2022-02-27 10:57:43	0	🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺Зеленский 🇮 🇩 🇮 🇳 🇦 🇽 🇺 🇺 🇮 +🇺🇦=🇷🇺 Слава РОССИИ🇷🇺 ПУТИН 🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺	🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺 Зеленский 🇮 🇩 🇮 🇳 🇦 🇽 🇺 🇺 🇮 +🇺🇦 =🇷🇺 Glory to RUSSIA🇷🇺 PUTIN 🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺
2022-02-28 06:24:21	0	я за мир:🇷🇺+🇺🇦 =🇷🇺	I am for peace: 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-02-28 07:46:44	6	я за мир 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 =🇨🇳	I am for peace 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇨🇳
2022-02-25 11:04:02	670	!!!Мы за мир!!!🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	!!! We are for peace !!! 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-02-25 15:34:07	1	я против войны 🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	I am against the war 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-02-26 19:42:36	176	Мы за мир 🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺 ❗	We are for peace 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺 ❗
2022-02-27 17:40:03	1	я за мир!🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺❤️	I am for peace! 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺❤️
2022-03-10 18:03:02	0	мы за мир!🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺❤️распространите ❗	We are for peace! 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺❤️ Spread ❗
2022-02-26 05:43:22	114	Я за мир ! 🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	I am for peace! 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-02-26 07:08:29	7	!!!Мы за мир!!!🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	!!! We are for peace !!! 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-02-26 13:15:58	2	🇷🇺+🇺🇦=Чечня./будем жить мирно,детишки	🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = Chechnya./We will live peacefully, kids
2022-03-04 19:47:51	1	🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-03-03 17:42:57	0	Я за мир!🇷🇺+🇺🇦+🇺🇸=🇰🇿	I am for peace! 🇷🇺+🇺🇦+🇺🇸 = 🇰🇿
2022-03-03 19:08:09	1	🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-03-04 18:56:33	0	🇷🇺+🇺🇦+🇰🇿+🇧🇾+🇺🇿+🇬🇪+🇦🇲=🏴	🇷🇺+🇺🇦+🇰🇿+🇧🇾+🇺🇿+🇬🇪+🇦🇲 = 🏴
2022-03-04 19:30:12	0	нет войны 🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	no war 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-03-04 20:13:20	0	вообще я за мир!!!🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺	In general, I am for peace!!! 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺
2022-03-04 19:31:53	0	🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺 давайте жить дружно!? 🥹	🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺 Let's live together and be friends!? 🥹
2022-03-04 22:18:37	0	🇷🇺+🇺🇦=🇷🇺это факты.	🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺 These are facts.

Figure 3

Fragment of a string of 34 comments using pro-Russian flag emoji equations in the comment sections of the videos representing the first template. Some of the comments were published in February 2022 shortly after Putin declared his "special military operation". Most equations promote the idea of peace through Russian unity. Notable deviations from the formula include additions such as "Go fuck yourself, Zelensky", references to Chechen involvement in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as Soviet nostalgia. Comments of this type were publicly shared and aggregated en masse in different contexts of pro-Russian propaganda, which prevented them from being attributed to specific videos or individual users.

The empire language and logic that relies on inequality and subordination (Gorobets, 2022) is what drives the equations, introducing the symbolically laden idea of Russian supremacy through seemingly innocent exclamations such as "no war 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺", "I am against the war 🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺", and "I am for peace:

🇷🇺+🇺🇦 = 🇷🇺". Once again, the sticky alignment of words and flags in comments occupies an important position in the template's overall affective force. The desired containment of Ukraine under Russian symbolic and territorial order here comes to the fore as a cynical equation relentlessly repeated, appropriated, and modified 'in the name of love' and in sync with Katyusha's catchy tune.

3.4.2 Dissonant intensities in conversational comments with replies

Inherent to participatory propaganda, the memetic masterplots are designed to alert and make the audiences pay attention to the same extent as they offer reassurance. At the same time, while masterplots can work as instruments of bonding, they can also be sensed as ridiculous or absurd, prompting engagement that challenges the propagandist message. Unlike mere repetitive shoutouts, the comments with replies explicate a type of sticky intensity, which registers through interactions and makes protagonist and antagonist sentiments collide, increasing the heat. In replies to the three propagandist templates, however, the entanglements between pro-Russian comments and more critical engagements were rare. The dissonant comments which met *some* affirmation, did not reach the point of establishing firm associations due to the prevalence of replies supporting the propagandist intentions instead. Highlighting the videos' absurdity, alternative alignments did not gain traction as – unlike the shoutouts – they were not 'surfing on the right frequency'.

Such rare examples of dissent were part of the most replied-to comments in the 'attacked' template, celebrating pro-Russian political leaders as the reason why 'the West' wouldn't dare to attack. Producing debate, almost all these comments expressed ambiguous and nuanced feelings vis á vis the propagandist message. In the comment section of the most commented 'attacked' video, two of the top five most-replied-to-comments directly contest the propagandist masterplot. The first is preempting accusations of being unpatriotic by saying: *I am from Russia and I am a patriot of Russia, but I do not support the current President Putin.* The second points out that the whole 'fear of being attacked' borders on absurdity when the only attacking side is 'your own' (*But you attack!*).

Delegitimising alignments with Putin's current policies, the first most replied-to comment draws the line between Russian patriotism and support for the current political regime. While this comment received significantly fewer likes (67 where the protagonist replies received between 2,5k to almost 12k likes), users were enticed enough to engage in amplifying this critique or pushing back on it. Push-backs in particular referred to the strength of the Russian army, portraying Putin as a strong leader who "turned Russia into a global powerhouse". In contrast to the comment itself, the replies boasted about Putin's ability to shore up the military strength of Russia, affirming the propagandist message. The comment pointing out the absurdity of being afraid when your party is the one who invaded in the first place mostly triggered responses like "Glory to Russia" conveyed through repeated RU flag emojis (🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺🇷🇺). Outgroup commentators found themselves outnumbered and any response they made only amplified the overall pro-Russian stance. Here, outrage was not only overshadowed by in-group support, but it also served the masterplots' mission to inscribe one-sided belongings.

Three other comments with replies were linked to the suspense element of the 'attacked' masterplot, transporting affects such as insecurity and precarity in speculations about Russia facing a fate similar to Syria if NATO intervened. In one of the comments, names were added to an imagined list of political leaders who would support Russia, including Trump. The list sparked responses indicating that (in particular) without Trump in office he would be a useless ally. Further replies delved into claims about Trump's allegiance – "He changed his shoes" – prompting debates on whether Trump would support the war in Ukraine and on who possesses enough information to make such assertions. Such subtle disagreements deserve further elaboration as they appeared in multiple variations, regardless of the initial comment's stance. For example, the idea of an 'imperialist fantasy' involving Russia being supported by China triggered responses questioning China's supposed pro-Russian position. Despite efforts to divert the pro-Russian narrative, these attempts often struggled against the recurring reassuring comments, like:

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"Ah, China has always been a friend to the USSR. And also other countries like India, Brazil, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, etc., will support us."

A similar strategy reappears in the replies to the comment about being a patriot of Russia but not supporting Putin: *"Putin doesn't lose. All nations acknowledge this and fear conflict with 🇷🇺."* Further replies amassed by similar comments confirmed that in a communication environment where "nuance takes too long" (Dean, 2021, p. ix), ambiguous positions struggle for attention. Sarcasm, aligned with a patriotic stance, prevents anything more intricate than simple emoji-based interactions from gaining traction. In the replies to the attack template, this showcases how alternative opinions and attempts at conversation merely serve the propagandist intentions. Determining whether these interactive dynamics are spontaneous or coordinated is beyond this article's scope. However, by revealing an unequal landscape of engagement, the audiencing of propaganda unveils some of the TikTok-specific means of participation and amplification.

3.5 Propaganda by other means: networked masterplots and music as affective glue

Acknowledging the impact of aural linkages in what Boler and Davis (2021) refer to as 'propaganda by other means', the methodological contribution presented in this article is twofold: Repurposing TikTok's sound infrastructure to detect memetic patterns first allows scholars to reflect on propaganda's affective linkages. Exploring how imitation publics transition from video adaptations to comment sections then reveals resonances and dissonances that expand the masterplot. In studying these relations, we argue for a situated analysis of video metadata and networked patterns across different layers of TikTok engagement – such as metrics, hashtags, sticker text, video effects, comments. It must be noted that the stickers and video effects were pertinent for the case study of Katyusha, but other content formations may rely on different features. By incorporating TikTok features in the methodology, the study thus offers sensitivity to their role in shaping persuasive content within the platform's attentional infrastructure. Against this background, we especially highlight the need to 'take the comments seriously' (Reagle, 2015), as these provide clues about the propagandist incentives and their bonding potential. We stress that while such contextual information is always crucial to the analysis of platform cultures, being mindful of its situatedness in the participatory nature of propaganda audiencing requires ethically attuned methodological pathways.

Our case study shows that templates on TikTok draw their engaging force from the combinations of different expressive modalities. A sound that carries templatable masterplots pre-sorts the audience in such a way that it enhances the likelihood of envisioned alignments. The role of Katyusha as a networker here is crucial: it is complicit in amplifying the propagandist message provided by the masterplot while stratifying audiences and attuning them to the shared sentiment. The suspense evoked by the videos extends into the comments sections, translating into sticky shoutouts and establishing in- and outgroups through interactions. The *dissolvement* of suspense, then, constitutes the masterplots' affective charge. Given away by the beats of Katyusha, it instals the 'pleasure' of seeing a pro-Russian positionality materialising in the envisioned 'crowd' of like-minded others.

All three templates follow a 'masterplot', revolving around an introspective contemplation of what it means to be Russian in the context of war and in relation to 'others'. The expression of national belonging in both video performances and comments involves a particular kind of collective identity performance. Such a "showing of sharedness" (Frosh, 2012) is always addressed to others, allowing the "I" and the "we" to be aligned in the affirmative act of subscribing to the 'Russian idea' of uniqueness and purpose. The pro-Russian frequency of alignments does not exclude dissonances. However, our analysis shows that the attempts at contestation compete over user attention against an amassed and coordinated public. While comments are equal contributions in and of themselves, propagandist intentions benefit from the unequal capacities of circulation (Dean, 2021). Without substantive repetition of the alternatives, Katyusha templates remain sticky with affirmations of pro-Russian sentiment.

The decentralised nature of TikTok content circulation, not only elevates propaganda's contingency on participatory practices, but it also entails more embodied ways of 'syncing into' the rhythm. Music – as it always did for propaganda (Jones, 2017) – creates a setting and an affective pathway that, on TikTok, carries templatable narrations of boundary work. The layered combinations of music and video performance entice imitation and spur repetitive replies that bolster propaganda's stickiness. Propaganda by means of TikTok sharing centres on bonding, rendering political persuasion secondary. In order to coordinate audiences into a shared sentiment, signifiers of a 'certain crowd' are made visible through the networked layers of expression that make up pro-Russian templates: the song, occasionally aided by hashtags, effects, gestures, or other cues of belonging do the work of in-group signalling. In so-doing, networked templatability paves the way for the support of the like-minded through further appropriations and comments. Capturing attention by way of suspense, the masterplots then reinforce what the imagined pro-Russian audience allegedly seeks: affirmation.

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