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The War, the Victim, and the Dance: TikTok Videos on the Russia–Ukraine Conflict and the Dancification of War

Válka, oběť a tanec: videa na TikToku o rusko-ukrajinském konfliktu a „dancifikace“ války

Abstract

This study examines the “dancification” of the Russia–Ukraine conflict on TikTok, where dance trends emerge from war zone accounts and reshape war communication. It argues that this phenomenon redefines news-sharing, transforms perceived conflict reality, and situates young users’ war news consumption within an entertainment-centered frame. Using a qualitative semiotic approach, the study analyzes a purposive sample of 20 TikTok videos featuring dancing soldiers, posted between February 2022 and July 2023, and examines their visual, auditory, performative, and textual signs. Findings suggest that TikTok’s audio-visual affordances can reproduce even concrete realities such as war through entertaining platform dynamics.

Keywords: Russia–Ukraine conflict, TikTok, dancification, war reporting, news-sharing, infotainment.

Abstrakt

Tato studie zkoumá fenomén „dancifikace“ rusko-ukrajinského konfliktu na TikToku, kde se válečný prostor stává scénou pro taneční trendy. Tvrdí, že tento jev mění význam sdílení zpráv, transformuje vnímanou realitu konfliktu a rámuje příjem válečných informací u mladých uživatelů odlišně od mainstreamu. S využitím kvalitativního sémiotického přístupu studie analyzuje účelový vzorek 20 videí z platformy TikTok, na nichž tančí vojáci a která byla zveřejněna v období od února 2022 do července 2023, a zkoumá jejich vizuální, zvukové, performativní a textové znaky. Zjištění naznačují, že zábavní dynamika TikToku může reprodukovat i zcela reálné jevy jako válku a vytvářet nové formy válečného zpravodajství.

Klíčová slova: Rusko-ukrajinský konflikt, TikTok, dancifikace, válečné zpravodajství, sdílení zpráv, infotainment.

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Introduction

On February 24, 2022, a new conflict emerged. Russia invaded Ukraine as part of a much longer conflict that began in 2014. Russia's aggression was recognized by Western democracies as a major threat to global peace. The aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has also caused the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. According to data from the UNHCR, approximately 7.6 million Ukrainians fled their country, while 2.8 million were forced to leave the Russian-occupied territory by October 2022 (UNHCR, December 6, 2022). Tens of thousands of people died on both the Ukrainian and Russian fronts.

On the other hand, a new phenomenon emerged during one of the most significant crises of the 21st century. In front of millions of its users, TikTok, which was founded in 2016 as a lip-syncing application, has become a war zone. While anti-invasion discourses increased on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, TikTok performed in a more rapid and influential manner (Badola, 2023). Amidst the exploding bombs, millions of victims, and escalating threats to the international order, numerous accounts claiming to represent soldiers and volunteers have begun filming dance videos in accordance with the application's algorithmic song and dance trends.

This study evaluates the various facets of a realistic conflict and argues that the "dancification" of crises is a phenomenon that merits greater academic attention. The new phenomenon has three aspects within its context. First, these attempts at trend integration from war zones alter the meanings of news-sharing. Second, these efforts reproduce the reality of the conflict. In other words, not only the epistemology but also the ontology of conflict and information dissemination acquire new meanings. Finally, especially young people follow conflict news in a different framework than the mainstream audience.

In this article, I use the term "dancification of war" to describe a platform-specific process through which dance-based performances, popular music, algorithmic visibility, and battlefield imagery are combined in short-form video content. Dancification is not simply the presence of dance in wartime communication. Rather, it refers to the transformation of war representation through the aesthetic and affective grammar of TikTok, trending sounds, choreographed gestures, hashtags, visual remixing, and the search for visibility on the For You page. In this sense, dancification differs from infotainment because it is not merely the softening of news through entertainment. It differs from memetic culture because it is embodied and choreographic, and it differs from performative digital activism because its political meaning is often ambiguous, oscillating between morale-building, self-expression, visibility-seeking, propaganda, and popular-cultural participation.

To support the theoretical argumentative claims of the study, the collected popular war zone dancing videos on TikTok shot during the war were analyzed. By employing this methodology, the study aims to open a new perspective on other crises and their entertainment-based coverage by TikTok accounts.

Context and literature review

TikTok's platform logic and algorithmic visibility

TikTok entered international markets in 2017 and expanded rapidly after ByteDance merged it with Musical.ly in 2018 (Geyser, 2021; Serrano et al., 2020). Although TikTok shares some social networking features with platforms such as Twitter/X and Instagram, its distinctive logic is based on short-form video, music-driven circulation, algorithmic recommendation, and imitation-based participation. Users produce and share videos with captions, hashtags, filters, and sounds, while trending audio from the platform's sound library plays a central role in shaping visibility and participation. For the purposes of this article, these features are important because they create the platform conditions through which battlefield content can be transformed into dance-based, affective, and highly shareable war representation.

The For You page (FYP) is central to TikTok's platform logic. It functions as an algorithmic recommendation feed that reorganizes visibility according to user preferences, interaction histories, audio trends, and content engagement. As Primig et al. (2023) note, the algorithm becomes part of the platform experience itself by shaping what users encounter and how content circulates. In this sense, TikTok does not merely host videos; it actively structures the conditions under which specific videos become visible, imitated, remixed, and emotionally consumed.

TikTok's swipe-based interface also encourages continuous viewing by presenting one video at a time. This design supports rapid consumption and repetition, while features such as duet, stitch, and reusable sounds allow users to imitate, respond to, remix, or recontextualize existing content. As Zeng and Abidin (2021) show, audio use and duet practices can shape collective identification and self-representation, especially among Generation Z. These affordances are directly relevant to dancification because dance videos often circulate through imitation, sound reuse, and choreographic repetition.

Different outcomes of and perspectives on the platform dynamics of TikTok should be mentioned in this part of the contextual framework. Although the progress of efforts of academic interest has been slow, the growing literature on TikTok produces knowledge on the platform's impacts on individual and social characteristics. Studies on TikTok use show that short-form video consumption is often motivated by novelty-seeking, habit, entertainment, emotional release, killing time, and escapism (Dong and Xie, 2022). These motives help explain why crisis-related or war-related content can circulate within the same platform environment as humorous, musical, or dance-based content. Research on algorithmic identity also shows that TikTok users adapt their self-representation to perceived algorithmic visibility and platform norms (Karizat et al., 2021).

Montag et al. (2021) similarly emphasize that TikTok's design can generate strong socio-psychological effects because its algorithmic features encourage repeated engagement. For this study, the key point is not TikTok addiction in itself, but the way algorithmic and affective design can make even war-related content part of habitual entertainment consumption.

War representation, news-sharing, and infotainment on TikTok

The second body of literature concerns the representation of war on TikTok and other social media platforms. Since TikTok is a relatively new platform, the academic literature remains limited but rapidly growing. Its expansion coincided with major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine war, making it an important site for studying how political violence, crisis communication, and entertainment-oriented platform culture intersect. This article builds on this literature but focuses specifically on the dance-based and performative representation of war.

Primig et al. (2023) provide one of the closest points of reference for this study. Their work shows that remixing practices on TikTok recontextualize the Russia–Ukraine war through the platform’s audio-visual affordances. They argue that war-related content is reshaped through visual editing, sound remixing, and self-performance. This is crucial for the present study because dancification can be understood as a specific form of such recontextualization: war is not only remixed visually or audibly, but embodied through dance, gesture, choreography, and popular sound.

The phenomenon is also related to journalism and news-sharing. Social media platforms have blurred the boundaries between journalists, citizens, soldiers, and political actors by enabling ordinary users to document and circulate events in real time. In restrictive media environments, algorithmic personalization can create opportunities for content that would otherwise remain less visible (Makhortykh and Bastian, 2020). However, the same personalization also raises concerns about disinformation, emotional manipulation, and unverified war-related content. This tension is central to TikTok’s role in wartime communication: it can make war more visible while also making it more fragmented, aestheticized, and entertainment-oriented.

The Russia–Ukraine conflict did not begin in February 2022; it dates back to 2014, including the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas. Earlier studies show that social media had already become an instrument of conflict during this period, used by state actors, non-state actors, citizens, and information networks (Makhortykh and Sydorova, 2017; Ciuriak, 2022). The 2022 full-scale invasion intensified this dynamic and made TikTok one of the most visible platforms for war-related content.

Disinformation remains one of the most prominent concerns in studies of TikTok and the Russia–Ukraine war. The platform’s music, filters, virality, and lack of stable contextual cues can facilitate the spread of misleading or decontextualized content (Alonso-López et al., 2021; Haq et al., 2022). Redmond (2022) notes that both organized actors and ordinary users may contribute to the circulation of war-related disinformation, either intentionally or unintentionally. For this study, disinformation is not the central object of analysis, but it forms part of the broader environment in which dance-based war videos circulate and acquire meaning.

The cultural implications of the representation are also significant as Ukrainian culture is learned by the international community. Serafin (2022) emphasizes that the process started in 2014 and activists have used the #StandwithUkraine hashtag to raise awareness in accordance with the political discourse of Ukrainian positions on regions such as Crimea. The process triggers grassroots fundraising networks especially online. Thus, the war becomes a field spanning both physical and virtual

spaces. Similarly, the war introduced new terms and concepts to the political and cultural fields. Actually, in the Ukraine case, governmental actors also played a role on TikTok and social media platforms. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky strategically uses video content to convey messages to both domestic and international audiences (Yekelchuk, 2022).

Dance, memetic performance, and the research gap

The third body of literature concerns dance, humor, memetic performance, and entertainment-based political communication on TikTok. TikTok's relevance to this study does not derive only from its role as a news platform, but also from its ability to translate serious social and political issues into forms of bodily performance, music, humor, and imitation. This is why dance videos from war zones should not be treated merely as unusual or humorous content; they are part of a broader platform culture in which visibility is often achieved through affective, performative, and memetic participation.

The blurring of different occupations, actors, and spaces requires a new conceptualization. TikTok's content is unique in terms of its practices and platform features. It is mainly an entertainment application where user interaction remains secondary (Steel et al., 2023). Dancing challenges on TikTok have political implications. Especially body representation in dance videos brings about new discussions such as feminism (Dekic, 2022). It creates a clash of values in the cultural space. As in Dekic's study, dancing girls represent mainstream values, as the feminist discourse challenges them. In terms of entertainment and dance videos of TikTok, the research by Lancaster et al. from 2022 aims to respond to a similar question of this study (not about war representation, but about a global crisis that is COVID-19). The research tried to analyze and describe "the use of TikTok by nurses who create and share dance videos on the platform during the COVID-19 pandemic". Dancing through TikTok could have similar motives both during military conflicts and pandemics. However, the solid findings of the study by Lancaster et al. demonstrate that even though dancing nurses aimed to maintain public morale during the lockdowns, such content was inappropriate in terms of professional ethics and reputation. The study focuses on the sexually suggestive characteristics of the dance videos and raises a caveat for maintaining the critical reputation of health sector personnel (Lancaster et al., 2022).

Matamoros-Fernández (2023) shows that humor on TikTok can challenge mainstream structures but can also produce harmful or ethically problematic forms of visibility. This dual function is important for the present study because dance-based war content may simultaneously humanize soldiers, produce solidarity, generate humor, and risk trivializing violence.

Abidin's work on TikTok culture and internet celebrity is also relevant because it situates the platform within attention economies, "visibility labour", and professionalized forms of content production (Abidin, 2020; Zeng and Abidin, 2021). In the context of war-related videos, this attention economy matters because visibility itself becomes part of the communicative logic of the content.

As can be seen from scarce literature on TikTok in the academic field, the sociology of TikTok tends to understand and participate in public discussions in the

context of entertainment. COVID-19, national elections, and military conflicts are no exception at this point. Its content could be understood as shared cultural contexts whose first concern is entertainment (Schellewald, 2021; Gotovtseva and Karpov, 2021). Most of the research on TikTok focuses on the entertaining nature of the platform to some extent. It is the major rationale behind this study to understand the phenomenon of dancing videos from war zones.

As defined in the introduction, dancification refers to the platform-specific transformation of war representation through dance, trending sounds, choreographic imitation, and algorithmic visibility. The following methodology section explains how this concept is operationalized through qualitative semiotic analysis.

These studies demonstrate that TikTok has been examined as a platform of algorithmic visibility, entertainment, political communication, crisis communication, and war-related news-sharing. However, the specific role of dance as an embodied, memetic, and semiotic form of wartime communication remains underexplored. Existing studies have analyzed remixing, disinformation, news consumption, humor, and infotainment, but they have paid less attention to how choreographed bodily performance transforms the representation of soldiers, battlefield imagery, and war zone communication. This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing the “dancification of war” and applying it to TikTok videos from the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

Methodology

A study that argues for the reproduction of meaning of a particular subject (from pandemics to military conflicts) should employ a methodology that addresses the meaning-creation. Thus, I find semiotics, the study of signs and symbols that carry meaning, an appropriate research methodology to analyze the meaning-creation process through TikTok dance videos on the battlefield.

In terms of the relationship of war and semiotics, war is a form of order and legitimization of collective violence, as Jacob notes (2021). The order of war is reliant on several objects, including systematized signs. For instance, uniforms distinguish not only opposing armies but also civilians from soldiers. That is why semiotics is a highly relevant methodological approach when analyzing war and conflicts. Jacob states that the semiotics of war is not only about analyzing current events, but it is also relevant for past conflicts. Commemoration of the past is usually related to an agenda in the present. Furthermore, the study of signification cannot be separated from the human aspect (Jacob, 2021). I consider these points relevant to my research design. Additionally, the TikTok videos related to war will be remembered in the future and will reshape the public perception again, in terms of the remembrance point seen in Jacob’s highlights.

Semiotics could be employed while analyzing social media content and even a framework for social media as a semiotic technology could be presented (Poulsen and Kvåle, 2018). Social media platforms are semiotic systems because of the abundance of signs and symbols they include. Images, videos, hashtags, and textual messages could be accepted as meaning-carriers. Semiotics in social media analysis could provide insight into socio-political issues. This type of analysis could also provide patterns and trends in the use of specific symbols within the scope of culture and

society. In my study of TikTok and the Russia–Ukraine war, I aim to find a similar pattern in the dance videos from the battlefield.

The data for this study was collected from TikTok. During the data collection process, the keywords “dancing Ukraine soldiers”, “#StandwithUkraine dance”, “dancing Russia soldiers” were used to search for videos related to the battlefield. TikTok videos containing dancing soldiers in the Russia–Ukraine war were dated from February 2022, when Russia started its invasion of Ukraine, to July 2023. By choosing this time frame, I aimed to capture videos relevant to the ongoing conflict while trying to be current. To establish an inclusion criterion, only content with 1,000 likes or more was selected for analysis. By employing this criterion, I aimed to ensure that the videos were popular and had a wide reach among the users of the platform. After the application of the inclusion criteria, a total of 20 videos were included in the study. The main rationale behind the collection strategy was to capture videos with a clear connection to the Russia–Ukraine war and dancing soldiers. The like count of the content as a criterion could be a limitation for the wide reach. I accept that the criterion may not encompass the entirety of the TikTok audience. However, it still serves as an indicator of popularity, taking into account that most of the videos have tens of thousands of likes and views. It should be noted that the main purpose of the study is to understand and interpret rather than to generalize at this point.

The unit of analysis in this study is the individual TikTok video. Each video was examined as a multimodal semiotic object composed of four main sign systems: visual signs, auditory signs, performative signs, and textual-platform signs. Visual signs included the background, battlefield setting, military vehicles, uniforms, weapons, lighting, camera position, and bodily composition within the frame. Auditory signs included the selected music, trending sound, rhythm, and its relationship to TikTok’s sound culture. Performative signs included dance style, gestures, gaze, bodily movement, synchronization, and the use of military objects during performance. Textual-platform signs included captions, hashtags, visible account context, likes, views, and remixing or reposting practices where available.

The sample was purposive rather than representative. The purpose was not to measure the frequency of dancing soldier videos on TikTok, but to interpret how highly visible examples of such videos construct meaning around war, soldiers, entertainment, and platform participation. The threshold of 1,000 likes was used as a minimal indicator of public visibility. In practice, several videos in the sample had substantially higher engagement, which made them relevant for studying the semiotic circulation of war-related content on TikTok. The sample included videos that explicitly displayed soldiers or military personnel dancing in contexts connected to the Russia–Ukraine war. Videos were excluded if the military identity of the performers was unclear, if the content was unrelated to the conflict, or if dance was not a central element of the video.

The analytical procedure consisted of four steps. First, the videos were watched repeatedly and descriptive notes were taken on setting, actors, music, objects, gestures, captions, hashtags, and engagement indicators. Second, open coding was used to identify recurring semiotic elements across the sample, such as weapons-as-props, battlefield backgrounds, direct gaze, group synchronization, popular music, and choreographic imitation. Third, these codes were grouped into broader analytical

categories: visual militarization, affective normalization, popular-cultural participation, embodied self-expression, and platform-oriented visibility. Fourth, these categories were interpreted in relation to the article's conceptual framework of dancification, infotainment, memetic performance, and war representation.

Because this is a qualitative and interpretive study, the findings should not be read as statistically representative of all TikTok war content. Rather, the analysis offers a conceptual and semiotic interpretation of a limited but analytically significant set of videos. The study therefore aims to generate an analytical framework for future research rather than to make generalizable claims about all young users, all TikTok content, or the entire Russia–Ukraine information environment.

During the analysis of the videos, I used a qualitative approach and focused on the semiotics, mainly audio-visual elements in the videos. The key themes were identified by employing a grounded theory approach. Thus, patterns and themes emerged from the data.

Figure 1: Dance videos of the soldiers during the Russia–Ukraine war

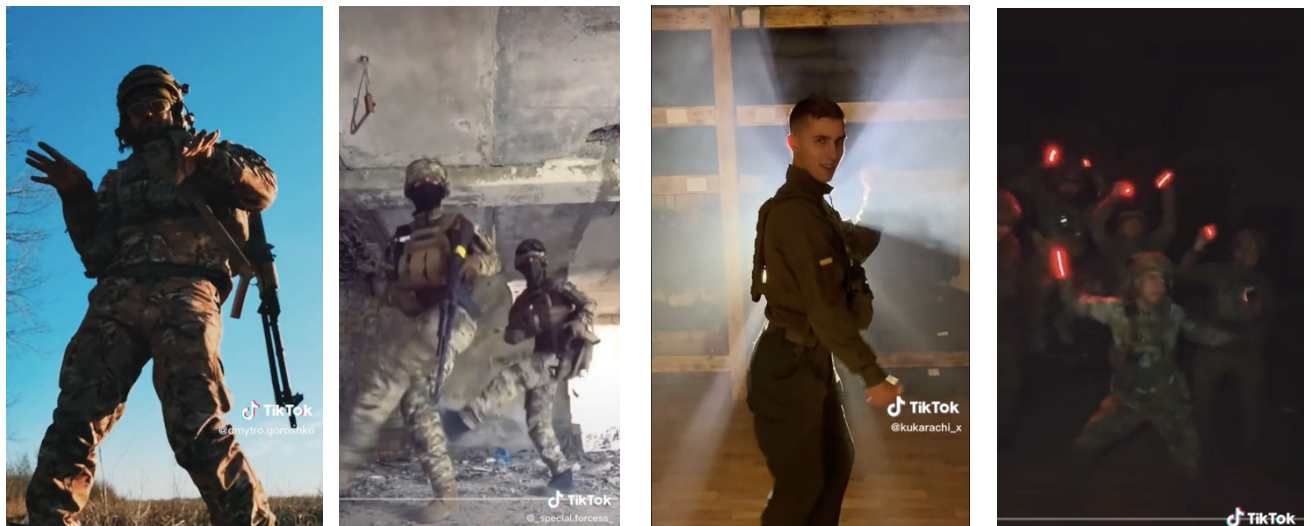


Figure 1 illustrates the visual diversity of the sample and demonstrates why the videos were treated as multimodal semiotic objects rather than merely as humorous or entertaining clips. The screenshots show different configurations of battlefield imagery, bodily performance, military costume, lighting, and camera framing. These elements are not decorative; they form the visual basis through which the videos connect war, entertainment, soldierly identity, and TikTok's platform aesthetics.

Table 1: Video sources and details

Video	Account/ source	Side/c ontext if identif iable	Settin g	Dance /soun d trend	Key visual signs	Hashtags /caption	Likes/ views
Video 1 https://www.tiktok.com/@alexhook_2303ua/video/7224424617098628357	@alexhook_2303ua (AlexHook_2303ua)	Pro-Ukrainian (Ukrainian soldier / supporter)	Military / barracks area	Dancing soldier trend	Ukrainian military uniform/elements, blue-yellow symbols	#україна #рек #топ #україна топ #славаукраїне #зсу #  	~79.7K likes ~634.6K views
Video 2 https://www.tiktok.com/@planet.in.ra/video/7249774026556542214	@planet.in.ra	Pro-Ukrainian / anti-invasion (rage against war)	Likely military or conflict-related	Dance / protest style	Military or symbolic visuals (limited data)	Limited data	Limited data (link preserved)
Video 3 https://www.tiktok.com/@miltokcover/video/7247919304510033158	@miltokcover	Ukraine war / military content	Military setting	Military/dance content	Soldiers or military visuals	Limited data	Limited data (link preserved)
Video 4 https://www.tiktok.com/@planet.in.ra/video/7250589123000618245	@planet.in.ra	Pro-Ukrainian / anti-invasion	Likely military or symbolic	Dance / expressive	Military or protest visuals	Limited data	Limited data (link preserved)
Video 5 https://www.tiktok.com/@dmytro.goroshko/video/7172919762131995910	@dmytro.goroshko (Dmytro Goroshko)	Pro-Ukrainian (Ukrainian soldier)	Military barracks / base	Wednesday Addams dance trend ("I'm gonna dance, dance, dance...")	Soldier in uniform dancing	#fyp #pek #wednesday #wednesdaydance #wednesdayaddams #standwithukraine #russiaterroriststate #dancingsoldier	35.8K likes 201.2K views
Video 6 https://www.tiktok.com/@dmytro.goroshko/video/7118225362101767430	@dmytro.goroshko	Pro-Ukrainian (Ukrainian)	Military setting	Dancing soldier ("фопма")	Soldier in uniform dancing	#українськийтікток #standwithukraine #dance	7.2K likes 39.5K views

Video	Account/ source	Side/c ontext if identif iable	Settin g	Dance /soun d trend	Key visual signs	Hashtags /caption	Likes/ views
		soldier)		згодит ься заміст ь піжам и?)		#dancings oldier #солдат #Ukraine	
Video 7 https://www.tiktok.com/@dmytro.goroshko/video/7115998090187787525	@dmytro. goroshko	Pro- Ukrain ian (Ukrai nian soldier)	Militar y conte xt	Dancin g soldier trend	Soldier in uniform	#standwit hukraine #dancings oldier (pattern)	Limite d detail ed stats
Video 8 https://www.tiktok.com/@dmytro.goroshko/video/7156219844621339910	@dmytro. goroshko	Pro- Ukrain ian (Ukrai nian soldier)	Militar y / indoor	Beyon cé, “CUFF IT” dance	Soldier dancing in uniform	#beyonce #standwit hukraine #пек #fyp #dancings oldier	5.1K likes 24.9K views
Video 9 https://www.tiktok.com/@dmytro.goroshko/video/7155384181051149573	@dmytro. goroshko	Pro- Ukrain ian (Ukrai nian soldier , 3CY)	Militar y settin g	Dancin g soldier (“Нікол и назад! ”)	Soldier in uniform, patriotic messagi ng	#українсь кийтікток #standwit hukraine #українап ереможе #russiater roriststate #Ukraine #fyp #пек #dancings oldier #перемог а #3CY	7.1K likes 34.1K views
Video 10 https://www.tiktok.com/@dmytro.goroshko/video/7134579867659652358	@dmytro. goroshko	Pro- Ukrain ian (Ukrai nian soldier , war contex t)	Militar y / war- relate d	Dancin g soldier	Soldier dancing	#війна #war #soldier #dancings oldier #dance #українсь кийтікток #українап ереможе #standwit hukraine	79.8K likes 599.4 K views
Video 11 https://www.tiktok.com/@husarjure/video/7195271691159833862	@husarju re (game of military)	Pro- Ukrain ian (Ukrai nian soldier , war contex t)	Militar y conte xt	Moder n Cossa ck	Soldiers performi ng traditiona	#fyp #military #ukraine #ukrainew	12.8K likes 80.5K views

Video	Account/ source	Side/c ontext if identif iable	Settin g	Dance /soun d trend	Key visual signs	Hashtags /caption	Likes/ views
		ne War, moder n Cossa ck)		dance by soldier s	l/modern dance	ar #soldier #dance	(Soun d: Моск овськ е пуйло)
Video 12 https://www.tiktok.com/@dmytro.goroshko/video/7114886577024683269	@dmytro.goroshko	Pro-Ukrainian (Ukrainian soldier, war context)	Military / war setting	Dancing soldier	Soldier in uniform dancing	#війна #war #soldier #dancings oldier #dance #українсь кийтікток #українап ереможе #standwit hukraine	79.8K likes 599.4 K views
Video 13 https://www.tiktok.com/@slavicpolishgirl/video/7076847452606729477	@slavicpolishgirl	Pro-Ukrainian + Polish - Ukrainian solidarity	Likely military or performance setting	Ukrainian soldiers dancing to Polish-created song	Ukrainian soldiers, Polish & Ukrainian flags/symbols	#slavaukraine #slavaukraini #polishsong	130.3 K likes 867K views
Video 14 https://www.tiktok.com/@kukarachi_x/video/7172589745518791941	@kukarachi_x	Pro-Ukrainian	Not specified	Wednesday dance trend	Dance performance	#wednesday #dance #fyl #ukraineu A #recommendations	300.4 K likes 2.5M views
Video 15 https://www.tiktok.com/@vicenews/video/7174087872763464966	@vicenews (VICE News)	Neutral news report on Ukraine war	Front-line adjacent / winter setting with war sounds	Dancing soldier in full gear	Ukrainian soldier in camouflage dancing, war sounds in background	#ukrainewar #russia #putin #zelenskyy #winter #december #snow #dance #pikachu #militarylife	265.9 K likes 2.3M views
Video 16 https://www.tiktok.com/@paoloi96/video/7174013052738751749	@paoloi96	Limited data (likely Ukrainian)	Not specified	Dance / military	Limited	Limited data	Limited data (link

Video	Account/ source	Side/c ontext if identif iable	Settin g	Dance /soun d trend	Key visual signs	Hashtags /caption	Likes/ views
		e- relate d)		conten t			preser ved)
Video 17 https://www.tiktok.com/@el_tio_sam04/video/7150307217969892614	@el_tio_sam04	Limited data	Not specified	Likely dance/military	Limited	Limited data	Limited data (link preserved)
Video 18 https://www.tiktok.com/@ukrainerussnews/video/7069933053518286126	@ukraine russnews (Ukraine Russia Invasion)	Ukraine- Russia war coverage	War / invasion context (mentions tanks, Kyiv)	Not primarily dance	War- related visuals (tanks, border, invasion)	#CapCut #prayforukraine #ukraine #russia #ukrainev russia #slavaukraine #tanks #kyiv #invasion	5K likes 94.8K views
Video 19 https://www.tiktok.com/@sunflower51201/video/7188164268116790570	@sunflower51201 (Sunflower51)	Pro-Ukrainian (references dancing soldier)	Military context	Dancing with fake guns	Soldier (@alexhook2303), fake guns, military	#slavaukraine #ukraine #dancing #fakeguns ⚠️ #glorytoukraine #ua #сузукі #military #fyp	3.4K likes 36.4K views
Video 20 https://www.tiktok.com/@miltokcover/video/7220753020060060934	@miltokcover	Military / Ukraine content	Military setting	Military/ dance content	Soldiers or military visuals	Limited data	Limited data (link preserved)

Table 1 does not aim to provide a statistically representative dataset. Rather, it systematizes the purposive sample used for semiotic analysis and makes the analytical material more transparent for readers.

The sample primarily consists of videos associated with Ukrainian soldiers or pro-Ukrainian accounts, while search terms also included “dancing Russia soldiers”. However, because TikTok account identities, reposting practices, and wartime content circulation often make direct verification difficult, the study does not treat account nationality as a fully reliable variable. Instead, the analysis focuses on the semiotic construction of soldierly performance, battlefield imagery, and platform-specific dance culture.

Analysis

The analysis is organized around three main semiotic categories that emerged from the coding process. These are visual militarization, embodied performance, and auditory-platform circulation. Visual militarization refers to the use of uniforms, weapons, military vehicles, destroyed buildings, battlefield settings, and lighting as signs of war. Embodied performance refers to dance styles, gestures, gaze, synchronization, gendered bodily expression, and the use of military objects during performance. Auditory-platform circulation refers to the use of trending songs, TikTok sounds, hashtags, captions, and choreographies that connect battlefield content to wider platform culture.

Visual militarization: backgrounds, surroundings, weapons, and costumes

Most videos are set outdoors. While several videos are created in coastal zones (e.g., Video 8), some of them are shot when there is snow on the field (Video 11, Video 13, Video 15), depending on the time and weather conditions during the war. Several videos that are created outside include military equipment to demonstrate the characteristics of military zones (e.g., Video 1, Video 18). This military equipment consists mostly of military vehicles. Soldiers dance on or in front of the vehicles and use the ambience of the war zone.

The choice of backgrounds reminds the audience that these acts of personal expression of the soldiers occur in real-world war conditions. Videos shot inside wrecked buildings function as a strong symbol of the war's destructive nature. The surroundings convey the difficult realities of the conflict. The same applies to the presence of military equipment and vehicles in outdoor videos. This equipment serves as a powerful symbol of the war zone. This symbolizes the soldiers' ability to find joy even within the war context. The difference between the videos featuring multiple soldiers and individual performers is noteworthy. Videos with multiple soldiers symbolize unity, camaraderie, and shared experiences. To sum up, the use of the war zone's realistic ambience reinforces the notion that soldiers adapt to their surroundings for personal expression. Furthermore, it should be noted that videos challenge the conventional separation between the military environment and personal life.

An interesting point is that three of the videos are well-produced in terms of equipment and lighting (Video 3, Video 14, Video 17). Soldiers try to participate in the trends of other dance videos on TikTok by using this kind of equipment. These videos gain the most likes and views on the platform (the most popular one with 2.5 million views, 300 thousand likes; while the second one has 852 thousand views, 130 thousand likes).

The lighting amplifies the visual impact and draws attention to the soldiers' acts of personal expression. It appears that the main rationale of the production of videos is to actively engage with trends in dance videos on TikTok. Soldiers repurpose their military equipment to participate in popular culture. This situation, again, challenges the conventional perception of the military as a rigid and isolated institution. The production and selection of settings symbolize the soldiers' ability and desire to connect with trends in the digital space. The aforementioned views and likes signify the resonance of the videos with the audience. The engagement demonstrates the power of visual semiotics and quality production in capturing attention.

Another prominent common sign is the presence of guns in the videos. Rifles and machine guns, along with the dancing soldiers, are mostly part of the dance performances. Moreover, several soldiers demonstrate and use them like a guitar (e.g., Video 3, Video 8, Video 10). Only one video has a rifle that could be interpreted as an ideological message. However, rifles are sometimes part of dual messages. For instance, in Video 2, a young soldier begins his dancing performance by placing a flower in his ear. When he turns his back to the camera, a rifle appears and is positioned in the center of the visual frame. It conveys a message that even the peaceful approach of one soldier could turn into aggression when it is needed. It gains a powerful meaning when taking another video of the same soldier into account (Video 4). In Video 4, the same soldier places another flower in his ear again, while his soldier friends are preparing for the war behind. The soldiers in the background load their guns while the soldier performs his dance with the flower in his ear.

Gender representation is another significant point. As mentioned before, most of the videos include male soldiers. It is unsurprising when taking the gender representation of the army into consideration. However, it is still valuable to note that the male soldiers mostly engage with entertaining video production. It should be noted that a female soldier performing “Pikachu Dance” gained attention. Moreover, VICE News, which is a popular news website on the internet, featured her performance on TikTok (Video 15). A dancing female soldier in heavy military camouflage in the middle of snow is subject to more attention in terms of women’s resilience in difficult situations.

The hashtags that are used are varied. #soldier, #StandwithUkraine, #Wednesday and #Wednesdaydance (which refer to a trending dancing challenge based on a popular Netflix series), #military, #ukraine. These hashtags are generally followed by #fyp that helps the video align with the criteria of the algorithm and be on FYP. The hashtag #fyp at the description sections of the videos demonstrates the primary rationale of the videos which is to reach a wider audience on the platform.

The visual signs in the sample do not remove the war context. Rather, they place dance inside recognizable signs of militarization. This combination is central to dancification because the videos derive their meaning from the tension between battlefield realism and entertainment-oriented performance.

Embodied performance: dance styles, gestures, gender, and gaze

The second analytical category concerns the body as a sign of soldierly identity. In these videos, soldiers do not appear only as combatants. They also appear as expressive, humorous, gendered, and platform-aware subjects. When analyzing the common theme of dancing styles and gestures of the soldiers in the videos, it is significant to state that the prominent selection of style is the clubbing-style dance (excluding Video 11, which has a Cossack dance). Dancing in a popular way carries the military context into a new reality. While traditional dances could be a common expectation on the battlefield, clubbing-style dance in the war zone is a new theme.

These dance styles challenge conventional expectations of military masculinity in the battlefield context. For instance, in Video 1, the soldier uses his hands and hips for signaling. The gestures in Videos 2 and 14 have the same tempting style. In Video 2, with the soldier with a flower, the pink cartoon-like badge on the soldier’s chest further complicates the conventional visual codes of military masculinity. These videos could

be interpreted as a social commentary on the versatility of individuals in military service. The selected dancing styles and flexible moves of the soldiers challenge the structured environment of the military. The dance styles also highlight the soldiers' capacity to adapt and express themselves even in unlikely settings.

The dance performances of the soldiers in most videos do not have similar implications as the dancing nurses research by Lancaster et al. in terms of sexually suggestive contents, as discussed at the beginning of the article. However, several videos have sexual connotations. The most significant one is in Video 6. A soldier wearing professional military sunglasses dances with a rifle positioned in a way that could be interpreted as symbolically suggestive. The rifle dangling from his body as a phallic object may evoke certain connotations including ideological messages to the adversary as well as a demonstration of masculinity.

Several videos have connections in terms of dancing setting and style. These videos are also significant in terms of the meaning they convey. For instance, Video 17 begins with a female soldier who prepares her friend's military bag. Then, he goes with the music and joins his friends who are a group of soldiers. They synchronically dance with red lights in their hands under darkness. Video 3 has the same performance while one soldier takes a helmet from his friend and joins his dancing friends with hand-held lights in darkness. Both videos have similar meanings such as unity, collaboration, and togetherness, as the synchronic dance of the soldiers symbolizes a collaborative culture.

A final point regarding gestures is the dancing soldiers' gaze at the camera. Most of the videos, especially with single performances, have the soldiers looking directly at the camera. The camera is always in a static position in these videos while the dancing soldiers position themselves in the center of the frame. Their connection to the camera and direct gaze signifies engagement and communication with the viewer (e.g., Video 1, Video 4, Video 5).

Auditory-platform circulation: music, sounds, hashtags, and trends

The third analytical category concerns the relationship between sound, choreography, and platform circulation. On TikTok, music is a mechanism of imitation, visibility, and affective connection. The music which is used during the creation of the videos is as important as the visual signs. This study mentioned the sound library and "use this sound" feature of TikTok above. The dance trends and challenges on the platform are created based on the trending sounds in the sound library of TikTok. The spread of dancing soldier videos is mostly because of this feature.

Trending sounds could be retrospective songs from past decades, current songs from new stars, or viral scenes from popular films and series. Platform users have promoted several songs by several singers during recent years. For instance, one video of dancing soldiers uses Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal" song as background music, while another one uses "Satisfaction" by Benny Benassi. However, the significant ones are those using current viral songs trending on TikTok. Three songs are detected in this category: Nooran Sisters' "Patakha Guddi" in Video 7 (Jain, 2022), Nathan Evans's "Wellerman" in Video 12 (McCluskey, 2021), and finally, the most viral one, Netflix series Wednesday's dancing clip in Video 5 and Video 14 (Katz, 2022).

When the videos use these trending songs from popular culture, it facilitates their spread to the FYP and helps them reach larger views. A significant point is that soldiers use choreographies of trending dances. For instance, “Wednesday dance” has its own choreography that is shown in the relevant scene of the series. Soldiers using this song also perform the choreography of the dance (e.g., Video 5, Video 14).

The use of trending sounds links battlefield videos to TikTok’s broader memetic culture. In this way, war zone content becomes attached to familiar rhythms, dances, and affective cues that users may already know from non-war-related content. This is one of the central mechanisms through which dancification operates.

Findings

The findings are organized around the three analytical categories discussed above. These are visual militarization, embodied performance, and auditory-platform circulation. The semiotic analysis of TikTok videos featuring dancing soldiers reveals a set of visual, auditory, and performative elements that convey complex messages. The videos under analysis, often set in real and challenging environments, present soldiers as adaptable individuals who find their way to joy even within the context of war. Gender representation, military equipment and lighting, music choices, diverse dancing styles and gestures, choreography, and popular culture play pivotal roles in shaping the narratives within the videos. The analysis explores the symbolism and cultural significance embedded in the videos, challenging traditional perceptions of soldiers while emphasizing their capacity for resilience, adaptability, and active engagement with broader digital and cultural trends.

The settings bring an element of realism and symbolize the challenging conditions of the battlefield. Soldiers actively choose backgrounds that reflect the difficulties they face, reminding the audience that the moments of personal expression occur in genuine war conditions. It highlights the soldiers’ adaptability. Diverse dance styles and gestures also highlight the adaptability of the soldiers. The soldiers adopt clubbing-style dance moves, challenging the traditional perception of soldiers’ masculinity on the battlefield. Their dance styles are expressive and sometimes feature sexually suggestive gestures.

Soldiers, typically associated with discipline and uniformity, are displayed engaging in diverse forms of personal expression, such as dancing and employing military equipment in unconventional ways. This challenges conventional expectations of military decorum and emphasizes the soldiers’ desire for self-expression. Guns are symbols while they appear as part of the dance performances. Guns becoming symbols carry dual messages, including an ideological message to adversaries and a demonstration of masculinity.

Several videos demonstrate soldiers coming together to dance and celebrate. The act of sharing moments of joy within the military context symbolizes a powerful sense of togetherness and shared experiences. These dances also reflect a collaborative culture among the soldiers. Dancing synchronically in a military context conveys a sense of unity and mutual support.

The videos challenge the boundaries between military and popular culture, discipline and creativity, or gender roles. They symbolize a willingness to blur these boundaries. They also reflect a desire for individuality and the ability to transcend

traditional norms. In several videos, there is an element of subversion and irony, in accordance with the findings of Matamoros-Fernández's research (2023). Soldiers employ military equipment or attire in ways that playfully subvert expectations. This theme introduces an element of humor and provocation, and challenges established norms. The act of dancing and employing lighting effects, often set to upbeat music, symbolizes moments of celebration and joy.

Several videos have high production values in terms of equipment and lighting. They are the videos that gain the most likes and views on TikTok. At this point, the question of propaganda, strategic communication, and platform visibility becomes relevant, especially when highly produced videos gain significantly higher engagement (Nilsson and Ekman, 2024). This demonstrates that quality production enhances visibility and audience engagement. The soldiers' active participation in dance trends on TikTok challenges the notion of the military as a rigid and isolated institution. The choice of music in these videos is significant. The sound library and the "use this sound" feature on TikTok play a pivotal role. Soldiers select trending songs from diverse genres including retrospective hits and current viral songs. The connection between music and visibility is vital for the dissemination of the videos. The interplay of music and choreography demonstrates the soldiers' commitment to participating in cultural trends on TikTok. Soldiers not only use trending songs but also reproduce associated choreographies, such as the "Wednesday Dance" choreography of the popular Netflix series. Soldiers performing popular dance trends could be accepted as a recontextualization as in the 2023 study of Primig et al. Another finding that shows similarity in their study is that the soldiers' dancing on the battlefield to a popular song connects the war context to the "affective audio networks" of the platform's trends.

Discussion

It should be stated that most of the videos are original posts by the creators, while several of them are remixed videos including the female dancing soldier's "Pikachu Dance" video shared by VICE News, the popular news website (Video 15). As VICE News generally produces war-related content and reports on global and regional conflicts, this remixing practice demonstrates this agency's news-sharing approach to the Russia–Ukraine case, namely participation in infotainment and trending culture. The findings of Primig et al. on remixing practices (2023) and observations by Otto et al. on infotainment as a level of softening of political communication (2017) are introduced in this example.

This study argues that the very realistic phenomena in the world are subject to a reproduction through TikTok's entertaining dynamics. War is no exception to this trend; the Russia–Ukraine war created new forms of communication which are based on entertainment and dance. This trend could be described as "the dancification of war". Thus, the argument of this study is three-fold: *Dancification extends into other domains of meaning, particularly the meaning of war and news-sharing. War-related content becomes partially attached to entertainment-oriented platform cultures. There is not only an epistemological challenge in war news-sharing, but also a mediated ontological reconfiguration in how war becomes visible, shareable, and culturally recognizable within platform environments.* Rather than claiming that TikTok changes the ontology of war itself, this article argues that TikTok reshapes the mediated

ontology of war representation, i.e., the ways in which war becomes visible, shareable, affectively consumable, and culturally recognizable within platform environments.

The term dancification encapsulates the potential impact of soldiers' dance videos on the public perception of war. Through the semiotic analysis, it becomes possible to observe how these videos may challenge conventional understandings of warfare and soldierly identity. Dancification demonstrates a departure from the conventional nature of battle, replacing it with moments of conveyed through the universal language of dance. It underscores the important role of digital culture in reshaping public awareness. Dancification offers a profound insight into the evolving dynamics of life amid a conflict and its portrayal in the public domain.

As it is seen in the relevant literature, dancification that comes with the widespread use of TikTok has demonstrated itself within other domains of world events such as national elections, pandemics, and workplace practices. Additionally, dancification could be evaluated as a sub-category of memetic performance and culture on the platform. Since the beginning of the Russia–Ukraine war, the war has become a subject of the dancification trend. It has many implications from security to social ethics. The human tragedy aspect and the reality of war are subject to change through the process, while a growing number of new users come online and consume news on TikTok day by day. As Primig et al. suggest: “TikTok could be a timely outcome of the technological progress in war reporting” (2023).

News-sharing is also subject to change, and new ways of war news-sharing emerge. The boundaries among journalists, citizens, and soldiers become increasingly blurred as actors create and share content with the help of a powerful algorithm on TikTok. It is not only an epistemological challenge but also has ontological outcomes. The ontology of news-sharing is not transformed in an absolute sense. Rather, its platform-mediated form is reconfigured through algorithmic visibility, remixing, embodied performance, and entertainment-oriented circulation. Even though the meaning of social media signs and symbols is context-dependent, the recontextualization takes place in the case of TikTok. The same impact demonstrates itself in news-sharing. I strongly agree with the suggestions of Otto et al. 2017 on the softening of political communication and infotainment level of their framework model. Mixing genre characteristics play a vital role in the dancification process.

Conclusion

This article has argued that TikTok reorganizes images of war through platform-specific forms of visibility, sound, movement, and affect. The concept of dancification captures this process by showing how dance-based soldier videos combine battlefield imagery with popular music, choreographic imitation, hashtags, and algorithmic circulation. The analysis of 20 videos suggests that such content can soften, personalize, aestheticize, and popularize the representation of war without necessarily removing its signs of violence. In this sense, dancification should be understood as the emergence of a mediated form in which war-related content becomes attached to entertainment-oriented platform cultures.

This study has several limitations. The sample is small, purposive, and limited to highly visible TikTok videos posted between February 2022 and July 2023. Account identity, nationality, geolocation, and original authorship could not always be fully

verified because of the unstable and remix-oriented nature of TikTok content. Therefore, the findings should be read as conceptual and interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. Future research could expand the dataset, compare Ukrainian and Russian or pro-Russian content more systematically, analyze user comments, and examine how young audiences interpret such videos. Mixed-method research combining semiotic analysis, computational content analysis, and audience studies would be particularly useful for testing whether dancification changes perceptions of war, soldiers, victimhood, and political violence.

Quantitative or hybrid research should support my argument in order to reach a level of generalization. However, theoretical and conceptual studies act as spotlights in times of rapid change. Generalization in terms of quantitative forms of research is not the primary concern for the type of research here. Thus, qualitative and interpretive arguments play a significant role before supporting or challenging quantitative data analysis. I suggest that the perception of war among TikTok users should be evaluated with artificial intelligence-backed linguistic analysis. Focusing only on hashtags during the data collection is another limitation. The FYP feature of TikTok, in terms of reaching popular content, is beyond the hashtags, even though hashtags also play a role in being promoted to the FYP of the platform. Additionally, more war-related content on TikTok should be analyzed in times of hegemony challenges around the globe. TikTok is a platform which is primarily used by adolescents. This solid reality should raise awareness among the academic community that wishes to present solutions for future social crises, and TikTok, as a research topic, should move beyond the current level of scholarly attention.

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