

## Meme Tales: Unraveling the Function of Memes in the Russian-Ukraine Conflict

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### Abstract

After a significant escalation of tensions between the two countries, Ukraine found itself at war on February 24, 2022, with the invasion of its borders by the Russian army. This unprecedented conflict in the heart of Europe gave rise to new forms of communication, including memes, which became integral to institutional and public discourse. This study explores the usage of internet memes during the initial stages of Russia's invasion, analyzing the memes shared on Twitter with the hashtag #Ukraine to gain deeper insights into their role among networked publics. Memes not only served as a chronicle of the conflict but also as personal narratives. Our analysis identified four main purposes for memes: conversational, cathartic, critical, and counter-memes. Each typology exhibited distinct levels of audience engagement and fulfilled different objectives. This research confirms the ongoing trend of employing memes as a means to discuss public events and actively involve users and institutions in public debates. Moreover, our study emphasizes the role of emotions in communication and proposes an original approach to operationalizing internet memes, contributing to the advancement of understanding in this domain.

*Keywords:* Internet Memes, Public Sphere, Networked Publics, Twitter

**Riassunto.** *Racconti memetici: le funzioni dei meme nel conflitto russo-ucraino*

Il 24 febbraio 2022, dopo una veloce escalation nei rapporti diplomatici tra i due paesi, l'esercito russo marcia verso Kiev. È guerra. Si apre così un conflitto senza precedenti proprio nel cuore dell'Europa destinato a segnare non solo gli equilibri sociopolitici ma a cambiare i modi in cui comunicare la guerra. Tra le forme comunicative emerse con forza nel conflitto ci sono anche i meme, diventati parte integrante del discorso istituzionale e pubblico.

Il presente contributo esplora l'uso dei meme durante le fasi iniziali dell'invasione della Russia, analizzando i meme condivisi su Twitter con l'hashtag #Ucraina con l'obiettivo di approfondire il loro ruolo all'interno dei pubblici interconnessi. Non solo strumenti di storytelling ma anche veicoli di narrazione personale, i meme si sono distinti nel racconto della guerra per quattro funzioni principali: conversational, cathartic, critical e counter-memes, ciascuna con un diverso scopo e con un diverso impatto sui pubblici.

I risultati della ricerca confermano l'uso sempre più organico dei meme come mezzo di discussione e coinvolgimento di utenti e di istituzioni all'interno del dibattito pubblico, evidenziando il ruolo fondamentale delle emozioni nei processi partecipativi. L'operazionalizzazione dei meme adottata nello studio contribuisce inoltre all'avanzamento della ricerca empirica in questo ambito, ancora poco sviluppata.

*Parole chiave:* Internet Meme, Sfera Pubblica, Pubblici Connessi, Twitter

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## 1. Introduction

An image that brings a smile to our faces and that we eagerly share with all our friends, a recurring sentence that consistently reappears with hilarious effects, a viral dancing challenge to replicate and then post on social media. In recent years, memes have become increasingly present in our daily practices, altering the way content circulates within platforms and how social phenomena spread and are narrated becoming «from quirky,

subcultural oddities to a ubiquitous, arguably foundational, digital media practice» (Miltner, 2018, p. 412).

All the events produced a substantial proliferation of memes: anything can become a meme, leading to a phenomenon of memeification of the public sphere.

Memes can be «jokes» or «humorous comments and opinions» (Grundlingh, 2018) and not only depict light-hearted and entertaining events but can also be associated with catastrophic and emotionally weighty occurrences. From the refugees' emergencies (Glăveanu *et al.*, 2018) to the rapidly transforming ecosystem due to climate change (Ross and Rivers, 2019), from increasingly intense electoral contests (López-Paredes and Carrillo-Andrade, 2022) to innovative social protest movements practices (Mina, 2014), memes have become part of the communicative strategies of the connected publics to participate in the communicative streams and story tell their point of view.

When the coronavirus pandemic ravaged the world, memes became a ubiquitous part of users generated content production in different countries and have proven to be a common tool, enabling individuals to confront an unimaginable challenge. From the initial lockdowns (Zhang, 2021) to the ongoing battle against the virus through information dissemination and vaccine campaigns (Basch *et al.*, 2021; Southerton, 2021), memes played a role in addressing both the social repercussions of the pandemic (MacDonald, 2020; Murru and Vicari, 2021) and the various effects and responses to the containment policies implemented worldwide (Bracciale, 2020; de Saint Laurent *et al.*, 2021).

In all these events memes can serve as tools for collective storytelling (Birthisel *et al.*, 2022), means for cathartic processes (Ponton and Mantello, 2021), and, in some cases, move ideological attacks through a process of “memeification of political communication” (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019).

When on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, it became evident that social media would play a significant role in the communication surrounding the war. This conflict, which garnered unprecedented media attention, rapidly permeated all forms of media, from print newspapers whose headlines were dedicated to the war, to social media platforms that were flooded with news, updates, and first-hand accounts of the events unfolding at the

European borders. The war's narrative has been shaped by various elements, including President Zelensky's appeals on Twitter and the live streams on TikTok by individuals residing in the affected regions documenting in real time the bombing of Ukrainian cities anticipated by the air raid sirens.

This evolving storytelling landscape has introduced novel communicative practices, wherein memetic productions have assumed a pivotal position within the information ecosystem. For the first time, various social actors, both elite and non-elite individuals, including citizens, institutions, and governments, have employed memes to achieve their communicative objectives, allowing them to address, exorcize, or otherwise engage with the subject of war, including producing information disorder, intentional and unintentional.

But social media not only increase the opportunities for real-time updates, they also play a crucial role in fostering user participation and aggregation (Milner, 2012). This is made possible through the affordances of the platforms, defined as the features of social media platforms that enable users to interact with each other in certain ways, which create specific "ad hoc networked publics" assembled and disassembled according to the topics of discussion and their temporary interests (Boyd, 2010; Bruns and Burgess, 2015). These publics, resulting from the intersection of users, technology, and practice, generate communities that come together to discuss, elaborate on, or position themselves in relation to common themes and interests. The digital features of social media platforms determine the various modes of social interaction they enable, such as personal profile spaces, friend lists, commenting features (boyd, 2010) or the use of hashtags to converge around specific topics (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Bruns and Burgess, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015).

Memes are fully embedded within these dynamics of content production and audience aggregation. From the beginning, they emerged as one of the prominent tools employed by connected audiences to engage with the topic of the war. Through the memetic lens, individuals utilized memes to discuss the unfolding events, express their political and ideological positions within different sides, and convey their profound dismay or apprehensions regarding an event that was destined to leave a lasting impact on the twenties of the 21st century.

Although memes have become a prevalent and widespread production practice in various contexts, empirical research on the specific functions they serve in the storytelling of networked publics remains scarce. This research gap necessitates a closer examination of the role and impact of memes in these contexts.

Accordingly, this paper aims to address two primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to investigate the formation of networked publics, focusing on instances where (common) individuals engage in simultaneous but uncoordinated actions that utilize memes as a storytelling device. These instances are particularly relevant in the context of overcoming traumatic circumstances.

Secondly, the paper aims to shed light on the diverse functions that memes fulfill in the storytelling of significant events. By studying the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a case study, this research aims to understand how memes have been utilized by the publics to narrate the conflict and explore the underlying purposes they serve in this context.

By addressing these objectives, this study contributes to a better understanding of the intricate relationship between memes, storytelling, and networked publics. Through empirical analysis and examination of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the role of memes in shaping public narratives during acute events.

The paper is organized as follows. The first part of the paper presents a reconstruction of the theoretical framework concerning memes in communication and their utilization in the context of warfare. In the second part, the focus shifts to the examination of the Russian-Ukrainian war through the analysis of memes shared on Twitter under the hashtag #Ukraine. A mixed-method approach was employed to analyze these memes to explore the diverse functions they served in narrating the war.

Furthermore, an analysis was conducted on these memetic functions in terms of the level of engagement they generate, thereby providing an indicator of the circulation of memes on social media platforms. The objective of this analysis was to determine whether any specific function succeeded in attracting more attention from the networked publics and to identify the distinctive features that characterize it.

## **2. The networked memes**

In 1976, Richard Dawkins sought to comprehend the mechanisms through which culture propagates in our societies. Drawing parallels with the role of genes in inheritance, Dawkins identified memes as the fundamental building blocks of culture, serving as carriers that transmit cultural heritage from brain to brain and allow culture to spread and be passed on (Dawkins, 1976).

With digital communication, memes became clearly observable since the Internet turned them into communicative artifacts that saturate media environments and occupy all communicative practices crosswise: from informal to institutional communication, from pop registers of ordinary users to the specialized languages of the subcultures that populate digital spaces (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019).

The concept of a meme itself now appears to coincide with its digital form, representing the swift propagation of an idea on the internet, manifested through various mediums such as written text, images, GIFs, videos, sounds, or their multimodal combinations (Milner, 2013). This cultural phenomenon has become deeply embedded in the collective imagination, solidifying its status as a mainstream element and part of digital folklore (Yogarajah, 2022).

While the definition of memes remains a subject of ongoing discussion and adaptation due to the rapid evolution of digital practices and tools, Shifman's definition successfully captures the complexity of these digital artifacts. Memes can be defined as «units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience [...] created with an awareness of each other and share common characteristics» (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). This definition properly captures the intricate nature of memes, encompassing their existence as cultural objects, processes, and aggregative practices.

Memes, in fact, originate from collective practices aimed at constructing meaning and

thriving within online networks that expect users to have cultural, social, and political awareness. While memes are created for swift consumption, their interpretation is not always immediate, primarily due to the intricate interplay of multiple layers of meaning embedded within them. Characters, backgrounds, aesthetics, text: each component remixed in a meme is linked to a cultural/ideological/social system and creates complex configurations that require a high mastery of “memetic decoding” to be grasped and interpreted consciously. Each remixed element in a meme produces one or more layers of meaning, and each layer offers different keys for interpreting the information contained in it.

The network of users that gather around the production of memes gives rise to *imitation publics*, which can be defined as a community of individuals whose digital connectivity is forged through the shared ritual of imitating and replicating content (Zulli and Zulli, 2022). Within these publics of like-minded groups, often devoid of pre-existing organizational structures, a common narrative is shared and co-created in new dynamical and multistream communicative spaces online.

Due to their ability to promote narratives and frames quickly and inexpensively, memes are particularly useful for those actors who are in a subaltern position or who struggle to gain space within the public discussion and mainstream media. The memetic streams can create a collective testimony composed of single voices, as occurred in the case of #distractinglysexy (Brantner *et al.*, 2019) or the #metoo movement (Fahmy and Ibrahim, 2021) or engaging and consolidating a community through the ironic frame, used to breach the timelines of users by making internet memes a powerful tool for exposing the double standards to which the BIPOC community is subjected (Richardson and Ragland, 2018).

The creation of interconnected streams in digital spaces fosters the production and dissemination of meaning, leading to the formation of micro-political acts (Harlow *et al.*, 2018). These acts, enacted by individuals and communities, play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and influencing social and political processes.

In this sense, memes become one of the most representative products of the logic of the connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) because they are configured as potential frames of personal action available for users. Everyone can “appropriate” a meme,

transform it and throw it back into circulation and doing so become part of a connected public that, through a multiplicity of personal actions, proves to be part of a larger collective action that is shaped through the contribution of each.

While memes have great potential to effect virtuous change, there are a few critical aspects that also accompany them. The ability of these cultural artifacts to construct *ad hoc* narratives for facts and events makes them particularly functional in a historical phase in which the stories that most persuade, excite, or crack a smile win out (Kien, 2019). It is through the use of emotions that memes are employed to foster information disorders portraying narratives that are built on partial or biased information – if not even fake news (Brennen *et al.*, 2021) – with the ultimate purpose of making memes ideological weapons against political opponents (Baker *et al.*, 2019; Denisova, 2019), social groups (Askanius, 2021; Brantner *et al.*, 2019), or mainstream media (Smith, 2019) in a consistent process of audience polarization (Candor, 2020).

The communicative stream that emerges from the affordances of platforms «serve as storytelling structures that sustain a modality of engagement that is primarily affective» (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 310).

The possibility of hiding information or ideologies between the layers of a meme, making them hard to decode, turn memes into potential weapons of propaganda or informational disorder. Not just as elements of informational disruption but also as real electoral weapons, memes have become a tool in the hands of leaders and political parties to run no-holds-barred campaigns. The 2016 “Great Meme War”, during the clash between the leaders running for the White House, is the first striking example where memes have been weaponized (Aisch *et al.*, 2016; Ross and Rivers, 2017). Despite memes being a prominent means, through which networked publics engage in and interpret events, relying on fluid and transient collective identities, where emotions play a central role in shaping the outcomes of this collective process, there is a limited amount of research that explores the different functions that audiences use memes for, as far as we know.

The classification of memes based on the reasons why the networked publics use them revolves around a fundamental dichotomy between memes categorized as «jokes» and those



categorized as «humorous comments and opinions» (Grundlingh, 2018).

The first type of meme production falls under the category of “absurdist humor purposes”. This involves the creation of memes that employ surreal parodies of mainstream cultural products, engage in nonsensical debates, and utilize altered images. In this type of meme, the primary motivation for entering the communication stream is predominantly ironic, rather than serving as a means for social criticism. The second type encompasses memes used for social commentary purposes. These memes are aimed at commenting on ongoing events in the public sphere by incorporating elements of political and social criticism into their storytelling. They often strive to draw attention to specific interpretative frames and have the potential to spark social activism and advocacy (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007).

Memes have emerged as incredibly versatile communication tools, serving both as a source of amusement and as a platform for spreading ideas and ideological messages. Shifman eloquently captures their importance, urging us to «take Internet memes seriously» (2013, p.172).

### **3. Memes in the Ukraine Social Media War**

Across the ages, the specter of war has loomed large in the annals of mankind. However, in addition to firearms, the evolution of warfare has seen the rise of communication weapons, becoming indispensable tools on the battlefield. The past century has witnessed a significant transformation in the way wars are narrated and the mediums through which they are communicated, as languages and media have facilitated the transfer of wars from distant battlefields to the homes of ordinary citizens. This phenomenon is exemplified by the Vietnam War, widely acknowledged as the “first television war” (Hallin, 1989) where vivid images of soldiers and explosions infiltrated the peaceful living rooms of citizens who had until then experienced war solely through the lens of newspaper headlines. Likewise, during the early years of the new millennium, when internet blogs held a prominent position in the



digital landscape, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 emerged as one of the first examples of an “internet war” (Hiebert, 2003). The multimedia narrative circulated through blogs gained significant traction in the public sphere, alongside the cable news network, exerting its influence and shaping public opinion.

Similarly, the media environment and participatory practices have influenced the narrative and development of the 2023 invasion of Ukraine within the digital public sphere, giving rise to the first “citizen social media war”. Unlike other conflicts like the Vietnam War, where the storytelling was predominantly filtered through journalists and correspondents as part of the institutionalized narrative of traditional media, the advent of social media among the affected population has enabled the inclusion of personal narratives alongside conventional media accounts.

Individuals who experienced the invasion firsthand have utilized various platforms to share their experiences, ranging from audio recordings capturing the sound of air raid sirens to videos depicting tanks in city streets shared on Twitter, Instagram, and even live TikTok broadcasts from bunkers or metro stations serving as safe places during bombings. Consequently, the war swiftly became an integral and substantial part of the social media conversation, sparking intense discussions and generating a significant volume of content. This evolving storytelling landscape has introduced new narrative practices, with grassroots productions occupying a central position within the information ecosystem, including the utilization of memes. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 witnessed a notable surge in memetic practices, marking it as an emblematic example of a war where social media has become fully intertwined with the lives of citizens and in institutional communication practices, likely the highest thus far with this level of citizen and institutional engagement (Ciuriak, 2022).

However, the use of memes within conflicts is not new: the earliest experiences of memetic-armed protests date back to the Arab Spring in which social media played a crucial role in the organizational structure of protest movements. Twitter, in particular, fostered the circulation of personal action frames that in fact represent the forerunners of political internet memes as we know them today. Sharing informative and positioned content and

having the possibility for users to participate in the “freedom meme” (Howard *et al.*, 2011) introducing in it their narrative, initiated a new way of participating in sociopolitical conflicts. A new form of action that influenced all subsequent movement practices.

Protests that used memes have also characterized later internal conflicts such as the anti-state protests in Hong Kong (Fahmy and Ibrahim, 2021; Mina, 2019) or the repressive measures taken by the Kremlin against the political opponents of Putin’s Russia (Denisova, 2019; Karatzogianni *et al.*, 2017; Shomova, 2022). Memes have also been central to resistance practices against terrorist cells such as ISIS, leveraging the humorous key to depower the strategy of fear used to inhibit any possible form of rebellion (McCrow-Young and Mortensen, 2021).

But memes are also not new in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict itself, which started in February 2014. From the very beginning, memes have offered users the opportunity to express their opinions by exploiting their anonymity and ease of production and consumption. Memes were used to spread a narrative that would otherwise have been ignored or censored due to limitations imposed on freedom of expression. In 2016 Wiggins concluded his work by saying: «Memes are sure to accompany the Russia-Ukraine conflict as it continues» (Wiggins, 2016, p. 481). A forward-looking observation perhaps even more than one could have imagined, considering that in recent years memetic communication has become a widespread practice even in institutional contexts and channels.

While the production of connected publics concerning the geopolitical tension has not stopped since the Crimean conflict (Gackowski and Brylska, 2022), Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has certainly given a productive boost to the circulation of memes online, often starting with the very solicitations from institutional accounts that have fueled various memetic waves.

Indeed, it is noteworthy to identify at least three key actors who actively contributed to the circulation of memetic content through their social media contributions: i) the Ukrainian government effectively exploited the propagandistic potential of memes, utilizing them as a powerful tool for communication; ii) the International institutions also embraced the use of memes, employing them to convey their stances and viewpoints on various issues; iii) the

citizens themselves leveraged the connective power of memes, facilitating a dynamic process of collective catharsis and the reevaluation of the trauma associated with unfolding events in Europe.

The Ukrainian government exemplifies a shift in institutional and diplomatic communication practices by engaging in memetic interactions with the Russian institutional account (@russia) and other diplomatic accounts. This strategic approach effectively captured the attention of the press and international audiences and can be seen in the circulation of the “type of headaches” meme<sup>1</sup>. Published by the Ukrainian government’s Twitter account @Ukraine, with the purpose, as stated by the account manager in an interview (Khurshudyan, 2022), to clarify that Russia, rather than Ukraine, the West, the U.S., NATO, or any other entity, is the primary cause of the escalating conflict, reaching more than 55 million interactions: an engagement that through the legacy media it would have been practically impossible to obtain.

Internet memes serve as an excellent solution for captivating audiences' attention, driven by two primary factors. Firstly, their extraordinary capacity to go viral enables them to bypass platform algorithmic selections effectively. Secondly, their “lightweight” nature serves as a form of “fast food media”, making them easily and swiftly consumable in the realm of modern politics (Denisova 2019).

The incorporation of a widely recognized memetic template not only aids in the dissemination of a meme by enhancing its recognition and ease of interpretation but also encourages participation due to its availability as a customizable template within numerous smartphone apps. Users simply need to identify their specific “enemy” and personalize the meme accordingly. Thus, in response to @ukraine’s post, the timeline is filled with producers identifying their “headache neighbours”, expanding the reach of the original message.

Additionally, the @Ukraine account utilized memes encouraging accurate terminology in the war narrative not only to the general public but to these news agencies, responsible for the media coverage of the war all over the world, tagging major international news outlets in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1468206078940823554> (07/07/2023).

their memetic production<sup>2</sup> (Bracciale, 2023; Indiano, 2022; Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2023).

The use of memes in public discourse has also been embraced by international institutional accounts such as The US Embassy in Kyiv (@USEmbassyKyiv). On February 22, 2022, in response to Putin's claim that Ukraine is a product of the Soviet Union and a part of Russia's historical territory, the embassy's Twitter profile cleverly countered this assertion with an ironic meme<sup>3</sup>. The shared image presents a historical sequence spanning from 996 to 1108, showcasing representations of Kyiv and Moscow: the depictions of Kyiv portray the city's development through iconic architectural landmarks, while the four images of Moscow only display a forest. This meme effectively underscores Ukraine's unique history separate from Russia, a crucial point that both Western and Ukrainian governments emphasize to dispute Russian territorial claims within Ukraine.

All these meme-related episodes involving the Ukrainian government and international institutions are part of a broader and multifaceted production of memes by the public, who have always played a central role in creating memes.

From the beginning, the public has been using memes to comment on events, express their positions regarding the parties involved, stay updated on the war's developments, and provide commentary on the measures and statements made by different states concerning the Russian invasion. The institutional positions, expressed through memes, spark new chains of communication as they comment on other memes. For instance, users respond to tweets from @Ukraine and @USEmbassyKyiv by either amplifying and reinforcing their messages or using memes to critique their content and highlight contradictions.

If it is true that everything can be memed, it is equally true that every meme will likely be followed by an ongoing memeification of it.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/ukraine/status/1481536598760173569> (07/07/2023).

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyKyiv/status/1496115593149358081> (07/07/2023).

#### **4. Research questions**

The research questions that guided the analysis are exploratory and descriptive due to the limited availability of empirical research on the topic and the still-in-progress operationalization of both dimensions and indicators related to the memeification of the public sphere.

RQ1 was oriented toward understanding the functions that memes played in the storytelling narrative of the public agenda, beyond the binary distinction between “jokes” or “humorous comments and opinions”.

RQ2 focused on the possibility of detecting a difference in terms of engagement depending on the functions performed by different types of memes and on the affective structure of the storytelling.

#### **5. Research design**

##### *5.1 Case study*

To observe the use of memes during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the study focused on Twitter. In a climate of profound political instability and uncertainty about the unfolding of events, Twitter proved to be the preferred platform for real-time updates due to the disintermediated and polyvocal nature of the Twittersphere, in which a plurality of social actors is co-present: institutions, leaders, media, and publics (Eldridge II et al., 2019; Vis, 2013). The hypothesis of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, considered implausible by most, was the subject of discussion and, when it became a reality, saturated the entire platform making Twitter the reference platform for being up to date with news and developments and taking a stand with respect to the event.

Twitter, moreover, has been at the center of the communication strategies of the institutional channels of governments, such as the previously mentioned case of Ukraine

(@Ukraine) and Russia, but also of government agencies and embassies, (e.g., United States Embassy Kyiv - @USEmbassyKyiv) that have made extensive use of it, sometimes even adopting and fostering memetic communications.

## *5.2 Dataset*

For the construction of the dataset, all original tweets that were indexed through the hashtag #ukraine and posted seven days after news outlets announced the start of Russian military operations in Ukrainian territories, namely at 7:00 AM (GMT+3) on February 24, 2022, were collected through the Twitter Researcher API. In total, more than 2 million original tweets (2,272,107) were collected.

From this dataset only the tweets containing an image, GIF, or video were extracted, thus using a definition of meme restricted to content consisting of at least one visual element. The resulting tweets were 457,865 (20.2%), produced by 206,070 unique accounts.

To identify among the common users who did produce highly successful memetic content within the communicative stream of the Twittersphere's storytelling, we selected Tweets based on the criterion of achieving or surpassing the "organic" visibility of the content producer. This hyper-performance was determined by the Engagement Rate Index (ERI). The ERI was constructed as the sum of retweets and likes obtained divided by the number of followers of the account. We selected the tweets with an  $ERI \geq 1$  which indicates a tweet that generated more interactions (likes and retweets) with respect to the number of followers of the account posting. By doing so, we were able to focus on memetic content that may have not gained high visibility solely because they were shared by super-users that already had a significant influence within the Twitter network.

Tweets with 0 likes and 0 retweets have been removed from the dataset. The dataset thus selected totaled 7415 tweets posted by 6301 unique users.

### *5.3 Methodology*

The 7415 tweets in the dataset were analyzed through content analysis to identify the presence of memes. The broad definition of a meme was borrowed by Shifman (2013). This definition was then adapted to an operationalization of memes as thematic participatory artifacts regarding topics on the public agenda. The ironic key was assessed as an integral part of the definition of meme while acknowledging the presence of different levels of intensity and intentionality, as well as direction (humor, satire, sarcasm, schadenfreude, etc.). To better understand how memes were composed the analysis also coded the structure (presence of text, layout).

To fully comprehend the role of memes in storytelling events that gain public attention, it is crucial to thoroughly analyze their intricate composition, ensuring that all the elements that contribute to a meme are considered.

Since memes are multidimensional, it becomes challenging to categorize them solely as jokes or comments, overlooking the diverse nuances that audiences bring to the conversation when discussing a topic on the agenda.

We therefore decided, based on the available literature, to consider the functions of memes as a combination of (i) content (a. topic, b. expressed emotion, c. humor style) and (ii) stance (neutral or pro/against: Ukraine, Russia, NATO, UN, Europe, USA, and World).

To categorize the topics, the memes underwent an open coding process initially, which involved creating specific categories based on the visual details, using the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 2017), we aim to identify the most recurrent thematic cores and categories that have populated the main communicative streams through saturation. These categories were then grouped into broader categories. Although the divisions aimed to be mutually exclusive, there were instances where multiple themes were present. In such cases, the predominant theme was considered. Determining the primary topic of each meme was crucial in understanding the central thematic focuses of the audience. The coding process resulted in the identification of eight main topics: War field (memes related to soldiers, weapons, military updates, etc.), Family and humanitarian crisis (memes depicting



displaced families, refugees, etc.), Diplomacy (memes involving states, international relations, international organizations, etc.), Politician (memes featuring heads of state and politicians, etc.), Values (memes expressing values such as freedom, patriotism, resistance, etc.), World (memes highlighting the global impact, war as a historical event, world reactions, etc.), Self (memes reflecting the personal impact of the #ukraine theme), and Other.

The variable related to emotions was coded because it holds a central role within both visual political communication (Farkas and Bene, 2021) and the affective component (Papacharissi, 2016) of the creation and propagation of memes. The success of memes is often attributed to their ability to elicit high-arousal emotions (Shifman, 2013) and create affective relationships based on either collective and positive humor or a stigmatizing/scapegoating dynamic towards others (Makhortykh and González Aguilar, 2020). However, the complex nature of memes sometimes makes it challenging to categorize the specific emotion provoked by each meme. To address this, alongside the categories “positive” (representing optimistic feelings, hope, enthusiasm or pride, etc.) and “negative” (representing negative emotions such as anger, fear, indignation, etc.), a “mixed” variable was included to account for memes where this division was not clear-cut (Martella and Bracciale, 2021).

While memes are often defined as ironic items, it is crucial to distinguish the style of humor employed, as it significantly influences the way humorous messages are communicated from the sender’s perspective. Different styles of humor can elicit varying effects on the recipients of the meme (Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong, 2015). Drawing from the framework proposed by Martin *et al.* (2003), the memes were categorized into the following styles: Affiliative Humor (positive humor about others), Self-enhancing (positive humor about oneself), Aggressive Humor (negative humor about others), and Self-defeating (negative humor about oneself). This classification allowed for a nuanced analysis of the meme’s impact and the different responses it may have evoked.

Lastly, the presence or absence of a stance towards the major political forces involved in the war (Ukraine, Russia, NATO, UN, United States of America, and Europe) was coded.

Stance is considered a fundamental element of a meme as it provides valuable insights into the communicative position of the sender regarding the message, the context, and other potential speakers (Shifman, 2013). Consequently, the coding took into account whether the stance expressed in the meme was in favor, against, or neutral towards each of these entities. Furthermore, during the coding process, it became evident that there were also memes expressing a stance towards the “world”, referring to unidentified individuals who were not directly involved in the war.

Coding was performed by 10 coders and was anticipated by appropriate training on annotation methods conducted on 10% of the dataset. The coefficients of Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  for the groups were highly satisfying in terms of almost all variables ( $\alpha > 0.85$ ) by conventions established in the field (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007).

To summarize the variables in a reduced number of dimensions, we ran first a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), then we applied a Hierarchical Clustering of Principal Components (HCPC) (Husson et al., 2010) to the MCA results, to find the memetic functions through the aggregation in clusters of the memes with similar characteristics. The combination of these two analytical approaches facilitated the clustering of memes based on their similar coded characteristics, revealing the different functions of memes that emerged from the combination of content and stance features.

Lastly, in order to analyze the impact of memetic functions on the public, the level of engagement was examined in relation to the clusters that emerged from the HCPC analysis.

## **6. Results and discussion**

About 10% of all the tweets containing visual content were memes, with a total of 745 occurrences. Memes were mainly composed of visual content alone (76.4%), while in 176 memes the text of the tweet was essential for them to be considered as such. The type of layout adopted was mainly a single image with or without text, 50.7% of the total), followed by multiple image composition (39.7%), and only in a low percentage (9.5%) of two

images, one of which was text-only.

The multiple correspondence analysis applied to the dataset allowed us to identify the main elements that characterized the use of memetic communication during the first seven days after the outbreak of war (Figure 1). For the analysis, the first two dimensions were considered because, according to Benzécri's reassessment of inertia (1979), explain 88% of the variance.

The first dimension is the most important as it explains 75% of the variance. Within this dimension, there is a clear polarization between positive feelings and negative feelings. Notably, the modes that contribute the most to this dimension are situated at opposite ends, with affiliative humor and positive emotions on one side, and aggressive humor and negative emotions on the other. This finding confirms the centrality of the emotional dimension in the communication stream on social media.

The second dimension (13%) appears to be more associated with a frame of attribution of responsibility, as it involves taking a stance either in favor or against various organizations and countries. It also involves references to the topic of diplomacy and the concept of the "world" as a bystander or co-responsible for the events at hand. This dimension juxtaposes the collective responsibility, which involves pinpointing faults, with the individual experience of bewilderment. Individuals express their bewilderment by employing irony and self-reflection as a means to decode and cope with the events unfolding.

Following Husson's approach (2010), a hierarchical clustering algorithm was applied to the first two factors that emerged from the MCA analysis. The algorithm allowed us to identify the clusters of similar tweets to better understand the functions that memes played in the memetic narrative of the invasion (RQ1). Based on the dendrogram analysis, four clusters of memes (Figure 1) were identified, which were named Conversational Memes (cluster 1), Cathartic Memes (cluster 2), Critical Memes (cluster 3), and Counter-Memes (cluster 4) due to their characteristics.

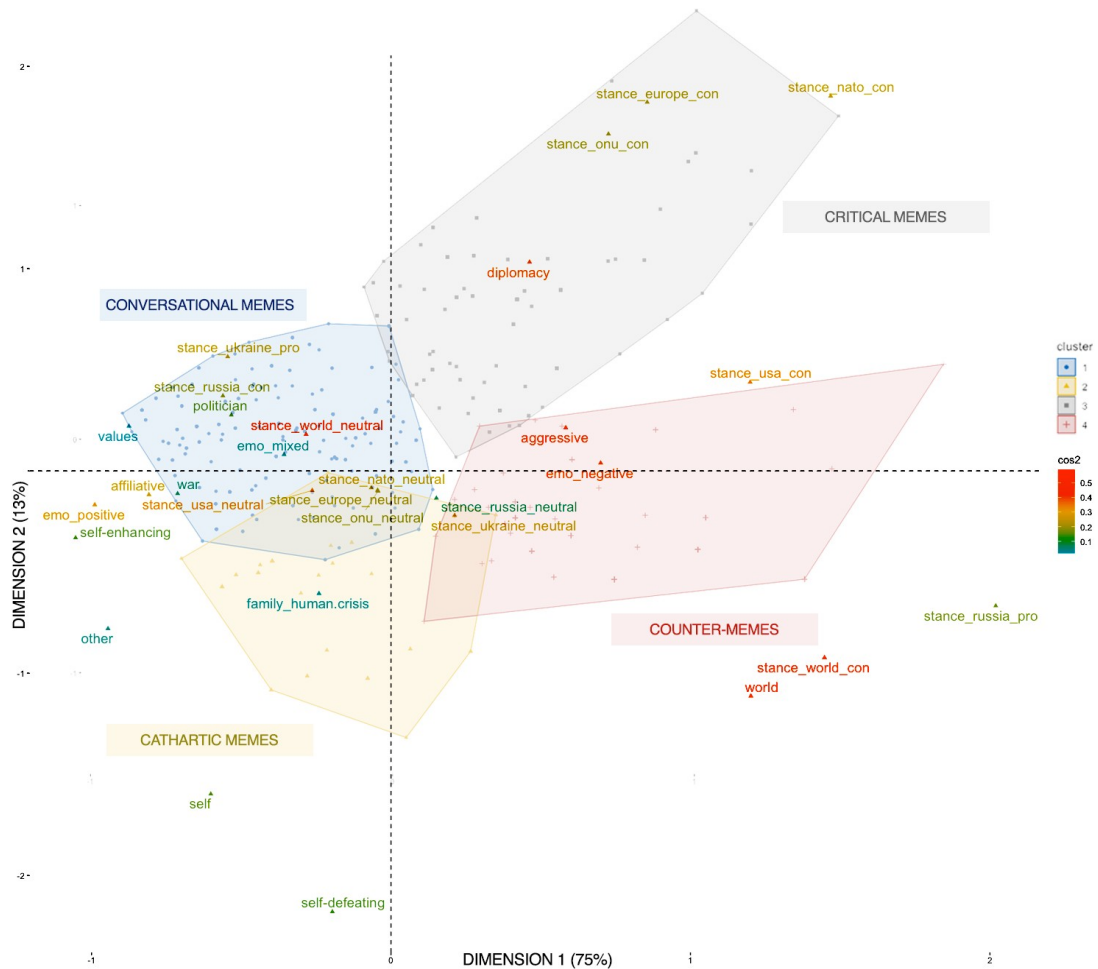


Fig. 1 - Projection of clusters on the first two dimensions of the MCA and HCPC results

### 6.1 Cluster 1 (408) - Conversational Memes

The first cluster is the most populated, containing 408 memes, which accounts for 54.8% of the analyzed sample. The memes contained in this cluster are characterized by positive emotions (the variable positive emotion contributes for 93.4%) and the use of light irony for fun and to entertain, with an impact of 91% for the variable humor style affiliative and 83% for self-enhancing. The topics discussed are related to the #Ukraine theme with either a general approach (e.g., how this event affects the historical period or everyday life) or a thematic one (e.g., the war or the values of the nations involved such as resistance, peace,

etc.). The memes in this cluster cover the media facts and communicate, through ironic storytelling, the developments of the invasion during the first days of the conflict. The stance prevailing is neutral, to the extent that all the memes in the cluster stand impartially with respect to the World, Europe, the USA, NATO, and ONU and the Mod/Cla ratio shows that almost all the memes that have a neutral stance towards these entities are contained in this cluster. Even towards Russia and Ukraine, the prevalence of memes does not express a clear stance but, when present, the stance does shift in favor of Ukraine (37%) and in contrast to Russia (48%).

The memes contained in this cluster seem to channel a practice of light participation, to comment on an issue on the agenda through the humorous frame, as already found in other studies (Grundlingh, 2018).

SOURCES: The notorious Ghost of Kyiv has been revealed #Ukraine  
Traduci il Tweet



Engagement Rate Index: 842  
Likes: 15930, Retweets: 1753  
Followers: 20

Brilliant 🇺🇦 #ukraine #solidarityWithUkraine  
#PutinWarCriminal #StandWithUkraineNOW

Things on Earth you can see from space:



The Great Pyramids of Giza



The Amazon River



The Grand Canyon



The balls of Volodymyr Zelensky

Engagement Rate Index: 263,3  
Likes: 5024, Retweets: 758  
Followers: 21

Figure 2 - Examples of tweets with memes contained in the Conversational Memes cluster with related statistics for the Engagement Rate Index, likes, retweets, and followers

## *6.2 Cluster 2 (43) - Cathartic Memes*

The second cluster is the least populated, covering only 5.7% of the overall population. It is characterized by memes about the reaction of ordinary users to the historical event of war. The topic “self” (associated with a 97% Cla/Mod with the cluster) and the “self-defeating” humor style (exclusively associated with this cluster with a 100% Cla/Mod) strongly characterize this cluster, indicating a predominant focus on self-referential topics and self-defeating humor. Additionally, variables related to neutral stances exhibit a moderate association, suggesting discussions or viewpoints that remain impartial on international issues involving Ukraine, Russia, and the United States. Furthermore, the lower association of this cluster with the topic of politicians (Cla/Mod 0,92%) and diplomacy (Cla/Mod 0%) indicates a lesser focus on diplomatic matters or political values within the cluster. The irony used in this cluster is self-defeating, a type of humor that is exclusively present in this cluster. Self-pity is used in 46% of the tweets to recount events in which the point of view is internal, meaning the main character of the meme is the “memer” themselves, and in which one’s behavior or reaction is not considered up to par with the situation.

The emotions contained in memes are not polarized, but positive and negative emotions coexist within the same tweet, displaying a moderate level of connection of the variable “mixed emotion” to the cluster.

The cluster collects memes that seem to recall the cathartic function already traced in other studies (Bracciale and Aglioti Colombini, 2021; Ponton and Mantello, 2021), which allows feelings of anxiety, fear, or bewilderment to be expressed publicly and exorcized collectively through the creation of connections with other users who experience the same situation and feel equally unfit to handle it.



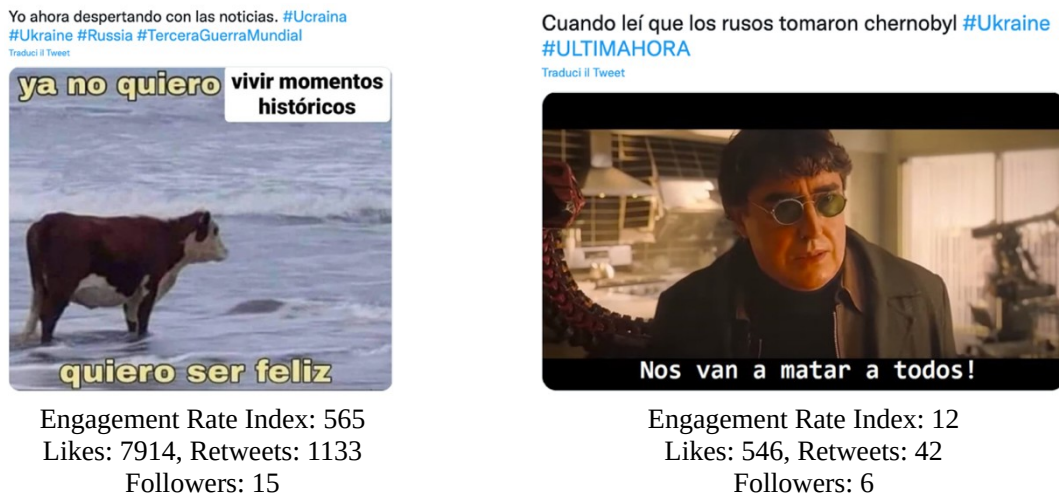


Figure 3 - Examples of tweets with memes contained in the Cathartic Memes cluster with related statistics for the Engagement Rate Index, likes, retweets, and followers

### 6.3 Cluster 3 (163) - Critical Memes

The third cluster (which contains 21.9% of all memes) consists of memes that deal with war by dwelling on the role of states and international organizations. The topic “diplomacy” has in fact a high Cla/Mod value of 66.5%, indicating a strong association with this cluster. The emotions expressed are mostly negative (73% of the emotions contained in the cluster) and the humor employed is directed in a hostile manner (humor style: aggressive) toward the subjects that are the focus of the meme. The memes in this cluster express positions that are strongly critical of the United States and the UN (Cla/Mod values of 97% and 59% respectively), while not explicitly expressing outright support for Ukraine or Russia. Negative emotions towards NATO and Europe exhibit a lower association with the cluster, implying a lesser emphasis on critical stances toward these two institutions. The variables associated with specific topics like “family and humanitarian crisis” or “war” exhibit a range of associations, suggesting that discussions or content related to these subjects – including family, humanitarian crises, and war – are partially present within the cluster.

The goal of the memes contained in this cluster is political criticism, an attack on those institutional actors who could intervene decisively in the conflict but are accused of doing



nothing or too little. The production thus fits in with the use of memes already detected in other studies as a form of political criticism aimed at attacking political opponents (Baker *et al.*, 2019; Denisova, 2019) or at polarizing the debate to emphasize positions, such as those against major alliances or military powers, already present in the public debate (Paz *et al.*, 2021).

#UkraineRussia #UkraineInvasion

President of #Ukraine is requesting EU & USA to give immediately support of troops & membership of NATO.

EU & USA right now:-

[Traduci il Tweet](#)



Engagement Rate Index: 210  
Likes: 2993, Retweets: 376  
Followers: 15

This is just the whole truth...  
#UkraineWar #ukraine #Russia

[Traduci il Tweet](#)



Engagement Rate Index: 77  
Likes: 1145, Retweets: 171  
Followers: 16

Figure 4 - Examples of tweets with memes contained in the Critical Memes cluster with related statistics for the Engagement Rate Index, likes, retweets, and followers

#### 6.4 Cluster 4 (131) - Counter-Memes

The last 17.6% of memes are contained in this cluster that deals with the collective reaction of the world regarding the outbreak of war. The memes have a confrontational stance with respect to the responses given by the populations or, more generally, those who witness the conflict (topic: world).

Using hostile humor (humor type: aggressive) and negative emotions, which occupy 90%

of the feelings expressed in the cluster, the memes of cluster 4 aim to shed light on the perceived double standard evident in how other armed conflicts in the Western world are treated compared to the current conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, these memes aim to expose the hypocrisy of providing formal support to Ukraine without corresponding tangible actions. Despite the criticism of inaction, the memes contained in the cluster do not explicitly side with Ukraine but instead remain neutral in 90% of the cases.

The cluster seems to aggregate memes that reflect the reality and the dominant collective consciousness through their storytelling (Candor, 2020) and make a ruthless critique of the national – if not even Western – society challenging the common sense with which this conflict is framed by the majority. The use of cynicism and biting irony aim to provoke critical thinking or public discussion, when not outright guilt, about one's role and responsibilities in the developments of the conflict and thus act as tools for denunciation and attempts at change (Mina, 2014).

Within this cluster are also the few memes that are explicitly pro-Russia and pro-Putin.

This Hurt's 💔 #worldwar3 #WWIII #Ukraine  
 #RussiaUkraineConflict #Russia #RussiaUkraineWar

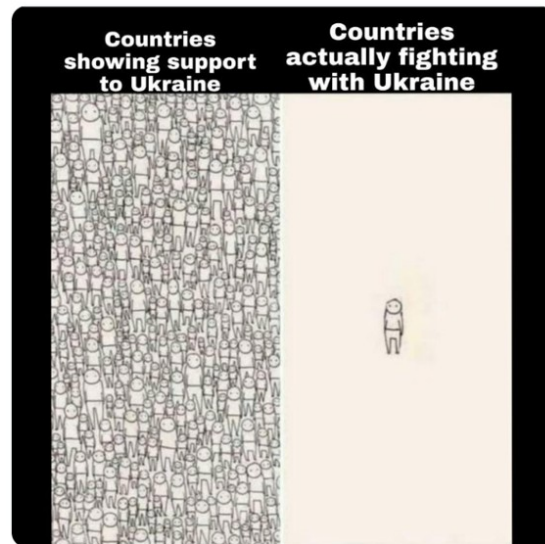


Engagement Rate Index: 405  
 Likes: 2064, Retweets: 368  
 Followers: 5

In the end!! Only the innocent people and soldiers will  
 pay the price 😊💔

#Ukraine #UkraineRussia #Putin #UkraineInvasion  
 #Ukrainian #แดงโม้ #Russia

Traduci il Tweet



Engagement Rate Index: 362  
 Likes: 3623, Retweets: 726  
 Followers: 11

Figure 5 - Examples of tweets with memes contained in the Counter-Memes cluster with related statistics for the Engagement Rate Index, likes, retweets, and followers

The four functions of memes identified above not only serve distinct purposes but also effectively engage the public in various ways (RQ2).

The analysis of the engagement (tab.1) shows that memes fulfilling the function of catharsis (cluster 2) are the most popular. Cluster 2 has in fact an important gap in terms of average Engagement Rate Index compared with the others and an average of twice as many likes and retweets as the other clusters. The predominance of the emotional component and affective polarization (Papacharissi, 2015) for engaging with the audience thus appears to be a central element for content circulation more than the ideological polarization aspect, as found in other studies on online emotional communication (Bracciale *et al.*, 2021; Martella and Bracciale, 2021).

Moreover, the other clusters demonstrate distinct patterns of audience engagement. Conversational memes (cluster 1) tend to generate a light level of participation, with a

significant number of likes. On the other hand, Counter-Memes (cluster 4) elicit more active involvement, as they are frequently reshared on individuals' timelines, leading to a considerable number of retweets.

<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Tweets Number</b>	<b>Average ERI</b>	<b>Average Likes</b>	<b>Average Retweets</b>
<b>1 Conversational Memes</b>	408	12,65	424,06 (Std dev: 2000,23)	55,74 (Std dev: 217,15)
<b>2 Cathartic Memes</b>	43	24,01	908,95 (Std dev: 3800,13)	136,19 (Std dev: 617,68)
<b>3 Critical Memes</b>	163	11,94	334,70 (Std dev: 1021,81)	47,75 (Std dev: 152,52)
<b>4 Counter-Memes</b>	131	16,01	417,15 (Std dev: 1417,65)	86,02 (Std dev: 295,25)
<b>Total</b>	<b>745</b>	<b>13,74</b>	<b>431,28</b> (Std dev: 1896,76)	<b>63,96</b> (Std dev: 260,98)

*Table 1 - Engagement distribution*

Another interesting aspect that emerges from the analysis revolves around the relationship between meme engagement and the number of followers of the profile that posted it.

As demonstrated by the significant variation in ERI (min=1, Max=842.048), memes have the potential to surpass the organic visibility offered by the profile that shares them. In fact, on average, memes with  $ERI \geq 1$  achieve an engagement rate that is more than twice as high (ERI mean=2.632).

This distribution suggests that the content of memes within a directed network is not solely dependent on the user's social capital. Instead, it travels independently, capable of acquiring significant visibility even without a natural organic reach solely based on the user's number of followers.

## **7. Conclusions**

The present study aimed to analyze memetic communication of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, focusing on how memes have become embedded in public discourse and the communicative purpose with which they were used by audiences.

The high presence of memes within the analyzed corpus of tweets highlights how these cultural devices are increasingly used as a habitual communicative mode for dealing with events that are part of the public agenda, fast forms of communication and lightweight structures that become "fast food" for commenting on modern politics (Denisova, 2016). The analysis of tweets tagged with the label #Ukraine allowed us to select the public discussion of the Twittersphere related to the geopolitical issue of the war in Ukraine and to identify an ad hoc audience (Bruns and Burgess, 2015) that discusses and connects through the use of the hashtag.

Within this communicative flow, memes were differentiated according to the functions they served: Conversational Memes, Cathartic Memes, Critical Memes, and Counter-Memes. Conversational Memes are memes that are produced by audiences to cover a media event, in this case the war, allowing users to enter the public discussion with a form of "entertained participation". Catharsis, understood as the ability to manifest emotions that are not socially accepted (e.g., fear, anger, anxiety, etc.), characterizes Cathartic Memes, which allow users to collectively exorcize these dark emotions by publicly expressing them. Critical Memes, in contrast, carry a strong political connotation and serve as a means to express dissent and judgment towards the political class. They expose the shortcomings and inadequacies of leaders, often employing ruthless comparisons between representatives from different countries. Finally, Counter-Memes serve as a form of counter-narrative, using irony to introduce alternative critical viewpoints that challenge mainstream social positions by highlighting judgments and contradictions within public narratives.

The high number of Conversational Memes demonstrates how these artifacts serve as a communicative tool that allows users to actively and lightly engage in real-time discussion on public events. On the other hand, the high performativity of cathartic memes in terms of

engagement highlights the strong ability of memes to activate social participation based on the already well-known dynamics of networked individualism, allowing users to express their own personal perspectives, even on sensitive and stigmatized topics, while connecting with others who share similar emotions or viewpoints. A way to «be oneself, together» (Shifman, 2014, p. 34).

In this sense, memes prove to be particularly effective connective devices for stimulating the shift from individual to connective action – as theorized by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) – since the participation and consumption of these artifacts encourage the development of networks of users. The individual experience becomes part of a collectivity in which those who participate inhabit a shared space and become part of a connected community capable of intervening in the online public discourse by expressing comments, emotions, criticisms, or judgments.

The emotional component of memes is confirmed as central to this type of communication and is used for the expression of individual feelings, often negative or difficult to express, which flow into collective forms of expression. It is a participation that reflects the concept of “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2015) in which emotion is the key to the involvement of the connected citizenry within digital cultures.

The humorous key, inextricably linked to memes, opens up new communicative possibilities by acting, on the one hand, as an effective hook for the attention and participation of users (Milner, 2013) and, on the other hand, as a deforming lens that, by highlighting contradictions or dwelling on specific aspects, allows ideological interpretations, political positioning or voices of dissent to be enclosed between layers. However, it is emotional connections rather than ideological affiliations that seem to drive engagement with memetic contents that focus on individual emotions as part of a shared experience. In memetic communities, this dynamic transforms into a collective ritual of catharsis, where users find solace and release by connecting through their shared emotions.

The analysis of the visual content revealed how memes are a communicative form that activate networked publics regardless of the popularity of the broadcaster. Indeed, the analysis on engagement shows how memes offer users an opportunity for great individual



visibility, independently of the digital social capital they have. Although this visibility is exponential and virtually attainable by anyone, it is nevertheless important to note how the anonymous nature of memes, which untie the product from the author, seems to make the visibility circumscribed to just the published content without real growth in terms of followers and popularity for the user who posted it.

Extensive analysis of users' timelines is consequently a natural development for the confirmation of this research hypothesis. An assumption that would also seem to support the recent success of algorithms based on content rather than user relationships, as the success of TikTok's "for you" case has highlighted.

Among the limitations of this analysis, the main criticality stems from the cultural embeddedness of memes, which are closely interconnected with the context in which they are made, reinterpreted, and disseminated. Some layers of meaning, therefore, may be related to specific aspects of the context in which the meme was created. Rather than a language problem, then, it is a problem of belonging to specific interpretive communities that analyses of memes will need to problematize more systematically.

The strong point, in our view, can be found in the attempt to operationalize memes with a shared definition by trying to identify, with the support of empirical data, the different communicative functions they play in connective narratives while being aware that they are complex and multidimensional objects. From this point of view, the mixed methods approach has proved particularly effective in initiating an operationalization capable of analyzing memes as complex cultural structures that are not yet unambiguously defined.

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