

“Stefania” for Identity, Affinity, and Disruption: The Role of Sound in TikTok War Activism

Jaana Davidjants

Abstract

This article examines the role of sound in war-related activism on TikTok by thematically analysing TikTok clips featuring the Ukrainian song “Stefania” by the Kalush Orchestra. The theoretical framework draws from social media, activism, nationalism and sound studies. From the analysis, four wider themes emerged. Firstly, the sound was utilized to express national identity by re-emphasizing and expanding on the patriotic themes present in the song. Secondly, the song was combined with diegetic (actual) sound to amplify the material’s affective impact and to foster affinity and resilience during challenging times, such as war. Thirdly, as the content spreads across the platform, controlling its use becomes challenging, which allowed Russian social media users to appropriate “Stefania” and contest Ukrainian narratives. Lastly, the sound functioned as a hack for visibility, with the aim of reaching broader imagined audiences. It is important to note that the sound on TikTok is not monolithic – there were uses of diegetic and non-diegetic sound and their layering, and these uses of sound served different functions.

Keywords: TikTok, sound, digital activism, Russo-Ukrainian War, identity building, affect

Introduction

This article examines the role of sound pertaining to war-related activism on TikTok. In my case study, I focus on the 2022 Eurovision Song Contest winner, “Stefania” by the Kalush Orchestra, which has emerged as a widely embraced war-time soundtrack (Post 2024). The current conflict in Ukraine began in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and supported pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region. However, in February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion (Walker 2023). By the end of 2023, millions of Ukrainians had been displaced (UN Refugee Agency 2024). Next to the physical battlefields, the war has been unfolding on social media platforms. TikTok has been at the forefront of war activism, with various actors creating and sharing material on the platform. The conflict has been referred to as the “first TikTok war” in news outlets (Chayka 2022). However, it has been noted that TikTok was also used, albeit on a smaller scale, in earlier conflicts, such as the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (Tiffany 2022).

TikTok is a relatively new platform. It gained traction around 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The platform differs in many aspects from other larger social media platforms. Firstly, TikTok prioritizes content engagement over

creator or friend interaction (Zulli, Zulli 2022). This emphasis is underscored by the platform’s “For You” page, which is driven by an algorithm that tailors content primarily according to user interactions (e.g. likes, saves) and viewing history. Secondly, the platform’s content is predominantly audio-visual, with sound playing a pivotal role in both content creation and consumption (Radovanović 2022). The platform has around 1.7 billion users as of 2023 (Press 2023), and its cultural impact is incontrovertible (Zulli, Zulli 2022; Sadler 2022). Overall, the platform brings “a new level of engagement with the notions of ‘participatory culture’” (Ramati, Abeliovich 2024: 5373).

As TikTok experienced significant growth during COVID-19, a considerable portion of research has centred on the platform’s content during the pandemic (Lundy 2023; Li et al. 2021; Unni, Weinstein 2021). Owing to the platform’s relative novelty, there is still a scarcity of studies exploring TikTok in the context of social movements and activism, though there are exceptions (e.g. see Hautea et al. 2021; Zhao, Abidin 2023). Cervi and Divon (2023) have particularly examined TikTok activism in a conflict setting, with a focus on how Palestinian users engaged in playful acts of resistance during the

2021 escalation of violence with the Israelis (on Sheikh Jarrah, see also Abbas et al. 2022). Studies focusing on sound on TikTok have started to emerge (Radovanović 2022; Vizcaíno-Verdú, Abidin 2022), including research on sound, TikTok and social movements. For example, Sadler has analysed protest music on TikTok and has highlighted how the use of sound can “create new avenues for expression” (2022: 8); however, users also perpetuate capitalist ideologies via gaming hashtags, thereby diluting the potential of protest music.

This paper builds upon existing research, but with a specific focus on the role of sound in conflict-related activism. The Russo-Ukrainian War provides a significant case study in this regard. Previous research has explored the portrayal of the Ukraine War on social media platforms (Badola 2023; Primig et al. 2023) and investigated the role of music in the conflict (Clark 2024). This article contextualizes these aspects within TikTok to explore how the affordance of sound shapes war activism on the platform.

For data collection, I conducted digital ethnography on TikTok in the autumn of 2023 to investigate the themes and content surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian War. The song “Stefania” by the Kalush Orchestra, the winner of the 2022 Eurovision Song Contest, emerged as a recurring audio motif. Consequently, my attention was directed towards posts incorporating “Stefania” as their soundtrack. My corpus consists of 102 audio-visual clips that were open-coded and analysed in depth using thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2006). Additionally, I interviewed two Ukrainians residing in Estonia to contextualize the material and the conflict.

This article begins by providing context to the Russo-Ukrainian War. It then presents the theoretical framework, which draws from social media, activism, nationalism and sound studies. The methodology section will be followed by an analysis focusing on four key themes related to the use of sound for activist purposes: “Stefania” was used to build national identity; combined

with diegetic sound to foster affinity and resilience; appropriated by pro-Russian TikTok users for contestation; and employed for visibility. The paper concludes by highlighting how the affordance of sound is shaping activism on the platform and calls for further research in this area.

Background: Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Before discussing the material of the war in Ukraine, a brief introduction to the conflict is necessary. The Russo-Ukrainian War is a complex conflict that started in 2014 with Russia’s annexation of Crimea. In 2013, Ukraine faced a political crisis when then-President Viktor Yanukovich rejected a trade deal with the European Union in favour of closer ties with Russia. This decision led to widespread protests in Kyiv, known as the Euromaidan movement, ultimately resulting in Yanukovich’s ousting in February 2014. In the aftermath, Russia seized control of Crimea, a region with a significant ethnic Russian population.¹ Following the annexation of Crimea, pro-Russian separatist movements emerged in eastern Ukrainian regions, particularly Donetsk and Luhansk. These separatists, supported by Russia, declared independence and sought to break away from Ukraine (Open Society Foundations 2019).

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. According to Masters (2023), Russia’s attack on Ukraine is motivated by geopolitical interests, with Russia historically viewing Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence. Regarding Ukrainians and Belarusians as “Little Russians” and “White Russians” rather than as distinct nations was an important element of Tsarist nationality policy in the nineteenth century (Kolstø 2023). Some Russians continue to view Ukraine as part of a “Greater Russia” (Wickström 2008). Domestic politics also plays a role, as the war served to bolster support for Vladimir Putin and his government by diverting attention from domestic issues (Ferraro 2024). Additionally, the quest for resources may have

¹ The demographic composition of Crimea has been subject to change. Prior to the 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tatars by Joseph Stalin, ethnic Russians did not constitute the majority on the peninsula (Hromenko 2019). In 2001, according to the Ukrainian census, ethnic Russians comprised 58% of Crimea’s population, Ukrainians made up 24%, and Crimean Tatars accounted for 12% (State Statistics Service of Ukraine 2014).

been a factor, given Ukraine's fertile land and energy reserves (European Parliament 2024; Masters 2023).

The war has led to a major humanitarian crisis. By the end of 2023, over six million Ukrainians had been displaced abroad (UN Refugee Agency 2024). 30,000–70,000 soldiers have been killed in the war (Richardson 2024; Armstrong 2024). The conflict has far-reaching geopolitical implications, straining Russia's relations with the West. In response to Russia's invasion, the United States and several European Union member states have provided military assistance to Ukraine, comprising weaponry, equipment, and training, alongside implementing economic sanctions against Russia.

Identity Building, Music and Ukraine

National identity has been examined through diverse theoretical frameworks. Primordialist theories posit that identity is intrinsically linked to land and bloodlines. In contrast, later theories, such as the concept of imagined communities, contend that national identity is constructed (Anderson 2006 [1983]). Brantly (2024) considers identity to be anchored in both spatial and social contexts, balancing its primordial and imagined foundations. The author highlights four aspects of identity, which are: "a shared understanding of history, language, religion, and othering" (Brantly 2024: 380). Music significantly contributes to identity formation, as it intersects with all these aspects. It is through music that people build communities. According to Bohlman, "our music" holds significant power as it is created within a group, serving as a means of communication among its members (2001: 20–21). Music, as a social phenomenon, "has the capacity to unite people and to create and/or strengthen social cohesion" (Darweish, Robertson in Clark 2024: 156). However, it is also via music that people differentiate themselves from other groups of people, thus signalling out-groups (Berger, Heath 2008). The link between identity and music

is further reinforced by war. Extreme events frequently shape national identity, with war being one of the most significant factors that can influence identity building (Brantly 2024: 386).

Ukraine and Russia have a complex historical relationship, with Ukraine experiencing periods of domination by Russia. This is reflected in Ukraine's music policies. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Soviet officials, as part of the early Soviet policy of Ukrainization,² promoted Ukrainian-language music. However, this ended with Stalin's purges in the 1930s and was replaced by a policy of Russification. During the Soviet period, Russian remained the dominant language, and individuals who sang exclusively in Ukrainian were labelled "bourgeois nationalists" by the Communist Party (Wickström 2008: 63). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's independence in 1991, there was a revival of Ukrainian-language music, blending traditional elements with electronic beats influenced by Western music (Splaver et al. 2022). After 2014, and specifically after February 24, 2022, Ukrainian music gained mainstream popularity, especially music using ethnic and neo-ethnic instruments (Vashchenko et al. 2022). An increasing number of artists began singing in Ukrainian, using this as a means to "emphasize a cultural difference and national identity distinct from Russia" (Wickström 2008: 63).

"Stefania" by Kalush is a vivid example of the revival of Ukrainian music. The Ukrainian language song blends folk motifs and traditional instrumental music from the Carpathian Mountains with hip hop. The song, written by the band's frontman Oleh Psiuk before the war, is dedicated to his mother: "Stefania mom, mom Stefania / The field is blooming and she's turning gray / Sing me a lullaby, mom / I still want to hear your native language".³ When the war began, the song took on new significance, becoming associated with the ongoing conflict. While the lyrics originally referred to motherhood, they came to symbolize the broader theme of the motherland. Kalush's performance at Eurovision

² Ukrainization occurred within the broader context of the indigenization policy (*korenizatsiia* in Russian), which aimed at integrating non-Russians into the party and state apparatus, promoting the use of local languages, and supporting cultural and social development among various nationalities (Subtelny 2009).

³ In Ukrainian: "Stefaniia mamo, mamo Stefaniia / Rozkvitaie pole, a vona syviie / Zaspivai meni mamo kolyskovu / Khochu shche pochuty tvoie ridne slovo".

included a vast amount of different Ukrainian (folk) themes and symbols – the orchestra members blend traditional embroidery in their costumes as part of their performance aesthetic. The distinctive pink hat, worn by the frontman, referred to as panamka, has become a prevalent item in war-themed merchandise in Ukraine (Helbig 2023). The song itself has emerged as a widely embraced wartime soundtrack (Post 2024).

Sound’s Roles in War: Music for Resilience

The utilization of music in conflicts, of course, predates the current war in Ukraine. Throughout the 20th century, music has been employed in various ways, though it has not always served to empower. Music has been used as a tool for psychological torture, as seen during the Vietnam War, in which the US troops used loud music in attempts to disorient enemy combatants (Heys 2011: 142). Another notable example of music being employed for violence, in conjunction with physical violence, occurred in Nazi camps during World War II (Brauer 2016; Karloff 2020). Conversely, however, some prisoners in the camps voluntarily composed and performed music as a means of coping with their circumstances (Clark 2024). Guido Fackler (2010) suggests that musicking in camps fostered “a feeling of community and solidarity”, enabled inmates to preserve their cultural identity, and provided a chance to preserve their dignity (cited in Clark 2024: 155).

An important dimension of music is its affective force (Clark 2024; Brauer 2016). Music can be a means through which new emotions are produced and can, moreover, serve as a vital resource for processing one’s pre-existing emotions (Brauer 2016: 7). Music can foster a “deep sense of pleasure and satisfaction” (Clark 2024: 153). Through the medium of music, emotions can be shared, giving rise to interconnected streams of affect (Suttie 2016). Scholars, particularly in the field of psychology and neuroscience, have explored various ways in which music can support resilience. Resilience can be defined as “the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma” (Windl 2011: 152). Music can create a shared emotional experience

among group members, and this emotional connection can foster a sense of solidarity, helping to cope with stress (Suttie 2016). Much of the research on music and resilience has focused on the role of positive emotions; however, shared negative emotions (e.g. sadness, anger) can also contribute to resilience by fostering solidarity and prosocial behaviour within communities (Garcia, Rimé 2019).

Today, imagined communities are formed largely on the internet. Similarly, a lot of activism takes place online. Social media users can be “present within the social network” without being connected through user accounts or having direct conversations (Zappavigna 2015: 274), with this being even more the case with TikTok, which encourages users to engage with the content, not creators or friends. These ambient activist publics emerge around content that invites “affective attunement”, supports “affective investment”, and propagates “affectively charged expression” (Papacharissi 2016: 308).

TikTok’s Affordances

TikTok was introduced in 2017 by the Chinese firm ByteDance, emerging from the fusion of two platforms: the lip-synching app Musical.ly and the video platform Douyin. The COVID-19 pandemic fuelled the already rapid growth of the app. As of 2023 TikTok had around 1.7 billion users, with the app being available in over 40 languages (Press 2023).

Different platforms offer distinct uses, so it is essential to analyse their specific affordances when studying them. Kreiss et al. (2017) have defined affordances as “what platforms are actually capable of doing and perceptions of what they enable, along with the actual practices that emerge as people interact with platforms” (2017: 12), highlighting the importance of both the technical capabilities of platforms and the ways in which users perceive and utilize these capabilities in practice. TikTok varies in several aspects from other large social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Guinaudeau et al. (2022) delineate particular affordances specific to TikTok. First is its algorithmic recommendation. TikTok’s “For You” page is curated using an algorithm that tailors content to each user’s preferences based on their interactions (likes etc.)

and viewing history. Interpersonal connections are de-emphasized on the platform, directing users to engage more with the content rather than with creators or friends (Zulli, Zulli 2022). Secondly, TikTok is a televisual medium, meaning that it is characterized by a video feed (Guinaudeau et al. 2022). TikTok affords built-in video editing tools and a variety of effects to assist with video creation (Zulli, Zulli 2022).

The majority of TikTok videos feature a soundtrack. Numerous studies have underscored the pivotal role of sound on TikTok (Radovanović 2022; Sadler 2022; Zhao, Abidin 2023). Sound is highlighted on the platform's "For You" page with a rotating icon located at the bottom right corner of the screen. Clicking on the icon directs users to a page containing all the videos created with that sound. On that page the user can also find the "Use sound" button that affords detaching the soundtrack from its original video and pairing it with new material. This kind of remixing of sound with different content has introduced "a new level of engagement" with participatory culture (Ramati, Abeliovich 2024: 5373). Sound, moreover, plays a role in how material scales up. When a particular sound gains traction on the platform, the algorithm is more likely to recommend videos using that sound (Lang 2024). Users, in the hope of boosting the visibility of their content, use trending sounds for their clips (Zulli, Zulli 2022).

Methodology

I conducted digital ethnography on TikTok during October and November of 2023. I checked into TikTok two times a week to get a better understanding on the themes covered, and more specifically music used as a soundtrack for the material. As my focus was on the Russo-Ukrainian War, I followed related hashtags, such as #ukrainewar, #ukrainevsrussia, #війнаукраїні (*viynavukraini*; "war in Ukraine"), #путинхуйло (*putinkhuylo*; "putin is a dick"), #война (*voyna*; "war") (in English, Ukrainian and Russian). My goal was to identify soundtracks used in war-related videos. Different songs emerged, such as "Dobroho vechora" ("Good Evening") by the ProBass and Hardi, "Shum" ("Noise") by the Go_A, and "Stefania" by the Kalush Orchestra. Since the first two songs had been largely used also before the full-scale war in Ukraine, I decided to focus

on "Stefania" by Kalush, as it is a well-known war-related song. I then opened the view with all other clips using "Stefania" as their soundtrack by clicking the sound icon at the bottom right of the screen. This revealed 261,4K posts. I reviewed the first 300 with the aim of obtaining a purposive sample. As my focus is on war-related activism, the criteria for inclusion (alongside using "Stefania" as a sound) was explicit references to war, such as mentions of war in captions both textually and in emojis (e.g. using both country's flags) and/or hashtags (e.g., #ukrainewar; #війнаукраїні (*viynavukraini*; "war in Ukraine"), #война2022 (*voyna2022*; "war2022") etc.). Thus, clips that focused solely on Kalush's performance at Eurovision were excluded.

This left me with 102 audio-visual clips. I downloaded these 102 clips from TikTok to my computer for analysis. Approximately 80% of creators had allowed their videos to be downloaded. For the remaining videos, the analysis was conducted on the platform – all videos were also bookmarked under my account. Downloading the video clips facilitated conducting thematic analysis in a structured manner. However, I set myself the task of studying the clips in parallel directly on the platform to gain a deeper insight into their dynamics within their environment. As for the method of analysis, the clips were open-coded and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2006), specifically focusing on identifying themes in the content and examining the role of sound in relation to these themes. I followed an iterative method in phases – familiarizing myself with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing them, defining them. In today's social media environment, emojis and hashtags, along with text, visuals and sound, contribute to conveying meaning (Tiidenberg 2015). Thus, these elements were taken into account in the process of analysis. Additionally, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with Ukrainians residing in Estonia, who helped me to contextualize the material. They also assisted me with translating the posts in Ukrainian – the clips under analysis were in Ukrainian, English, and Russian (the latter two languages I speak myself). The interviews were conducted on Zoom.

When it comes to studying war-related material, ethics is of the utmost importance, as

the creators can include vulnerable groups of people in the conflict zone or people who had to flee and are vulnerable due to their status in a host country. No interviews with content creators were carried out. The two contextual interviews were not recorded, researcher notes were de-identified and password protected. The content under analysis received a minimum of 30,000 to 50,000 likes, with most clips garnering over 100,000, reaching up to a million. This suggests the material already had significant visibility. However, due to the contentious nature of the topic of war, no material from TikTok has been replicated. The clips downloaded for the analysis to my computer were deleted post-analysis.

Concerning my positionality, I am not Ukrainian and do not speak the language. To mitigate this, the previously mentioned contextual interviews with Ukrainians living in Estonia were conducted. However, my Estonian background provides a certain geographical proximity and insight into the historical context, as Estonia shares the history of Soviet occupation with Ukraine. While this background knowledge can be advantageous, shared history also introduces the potential for bias, which is a consideration that I am keenly aware of.

Findings

This article explores the role of sound in war-related activism on TikTok. A thematic analysis of TikTok clips featuring “Stefania” by the Kalush Orchestra uncovered four broad themes regarding how the sound was utilized for activism. The themes partially overlapped; for example, national symbols appeared in multiple themes, but the first theme featured the highest concentration. First, the sound was utilized for national identity building via expanding on the patriotic themes present in the song. Secondly, the song was used in combination with diegetic (actual) sound to amplify the material’s affective impact and to foster affinity during challenging times like war. Thirdly, “Stefania” was used to counter initial Ukrainian narratives, as it was appropriated by Russian social media users. Lastly, the sound functioned as a hack for visibility, aimed at reaching broader “imagined audiences” (Litt 2012).

“Stefania” for national identity building: “playful patriotism”

Nationality is expressed by showcasing cultural traits (such as foods, habits, and traditions) or by displaying political symbols (such as flags and emblems) (Cervi, Marín-Lladó 2022). In the TikTok content analysed, Ukrainian identity, too, is conveyed through both. Cultural aspects are highlighted through traditional customs and clothing, while political symbols, including the national flag and emblems, are also prominently featured. The material is characterized by a patriotic tone, which is common in wartime contexts (Keller 2015), on TikTok, however, patriotism adopts a more playful tone.

A good example of patriotic content is a video featuring a young man decorating his face with various Ukrainian symbols. The clip begins with him applying the symbols – the trident from the coat of arms on his forehead, the Ukrainian flag on his cheek, followed by a sunflower and blue-yellow butterfly, until his entire face is adorned with symbols. These symbols carry different connotations. Both the coat of arms and the flag convey a more formal (political) symbolism. The sunflower, adopted during the war as a symbol of resistance, alludes also to nature and is a frequent motif in Ukrainian traditional folk art (Saienko 2023). In another clip following the format of a makeup tutorial, we see a woman applying makeup in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. She demonstrates the process step-by-step: first painting her upper lip blue, then her lower lip yellow. Her look is fully coordinated: a flag-coloured t-shirt, blue nails, and a Ukraine-shaped pendant. These two clips are united by their extensive use of symbols, albeit in different forms, to express national identity. Symbols play a crucial role in constructing national belonging, providing tangible means for individuals and groups to communicate their sense of belonging to both in-groups and out-groups.

According to Cervi and Marín-Lladó, TikTok affords a novel type of activism by encouraging “the users to tackle ‘hard’ topics more playfully, somehow ‘softening’ them, through the use of more playful communicative style” (2022: 428). According to Chen et al., playfulness implies “a light-hearted tone and something that is intended for amusement rather than to be taken seriously” (2021: 111). A similarly playful tone is

apparent in the analysed clips featuring patriotic content, such as the makeup tutorial described earlier or, for example, posts showcasing patriotic cats. We see a cat wearing a cape in the colours of the Ukrainian flag, with the coat of arms displayed prominently in the background and sunflowers scattered around the cat on the floor. In another video of that kind we see a cat wearing a small pink panamka, a hat similar to the one worn by a member of Kalush at Eurovision. Thus, not only do we observe a frequent use of national symbols, but unlike traditional patriotic content, which is typically serious, patriotism here is conveyed in a light-hearted or even cute manner, in a way that suits TikTok's unique culture, resulting in "playful patriotism" (Chen et al. 2021).

The analysed clips also prominently feature an enemy figure, often depicted through the image of Vladimir Putin. For example, there is a video montage of Putin where he appears to be conveying how bad life is in Russia (the video is made in a very low-key manner). However, sometimes the enemy figure is the whole of Russia. In another clip, we observe the blending of the Ukrainian flag's colours, blue and yellow, resulting in the formation of the colour green. A narrator explains that green represents the fields where flowers grow. When the colours of the Russian flag are combined, they produce the colour brown. The narrator states in a resolute tone that it is the colour of "shit" ("govno" in Russian). "Othering" has been highlighted as particularly crucial in identity building as it provides a framework for self-definition (Brantly 2024). In these cases, identity is expressed through the portrayal of an "enemy", specifically by mocking the enemy's flag and way of life.

To sum up, in this case, sound paired with symbols plays a pivotal role in national identity building. There are many different symbols, including national ones like the coat of arms, the flag and the sunflower, as well as newer ones, such as the panamka worn by Kalush's frontman, symbolizing Ukraine's victory at Eurovision during a time of war. The communicative style of this patriotic content is playful and light-hearted, even cute (Cervi, Marín-Lladó 2022) – we see cats wearing little hats and superhero capes, exemplifying what Chen et al. (2021) refer to as "playful patriotism". The main role of the sound

is to reinforce and amplify the patriotic themes present in the song.

"Stefania" for affinity and resilience building

Another significant theme that emerged from the analysis revolves around videos depicting life during wartime. These clips often portray destruction caused by conflict, yet they also highlight resilience. The content can be categorized into videos depicting the lives of civilians and soldiers in the war zone. Many civilian videos are filmed in bomb shelters, although there are also scenes of people returning to their homes. As an example of the first, there is a clip showing children in a bomb shelter with "Stefania" playing in the background. We can observe one of the children break-dancing to the music. As the song progresses, a couple of other children join in dancing, then, led by a teacher, start singing along. The music blends with the singing of children, as the song is playing in the shelter itself and has not been added later on TikTok.

This highlights the need to differentiate between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Diegetic sound reflects real life, such as dialogue or footsteps (also known as actual sound). Non-diegetic sound, like a soundtrack, is added in post-production (Woltmann 2022). The analysis of the material illustrates the use of various sounds. The majority of clips use non-diegetic sound (around 70%), meaning the only sound used is "Stefania" added on TikTok. However, there are also videos that combine different types of sound. This can, for example, involve combining diegetic and non-diegetic sound (e.g., a person filmed talking with "Stefania" added to it on TikTok). It can also include layers of only diegetic sound, as in the aforementioned case of children singing to "Stefania", which is playing in the actual space. The clips depicting life during the war often feature diegetic sound, as many were filmed in real locations, such as shelters or on the front lines.

A good example of sound layering is a clip featuring a soldier singing "Stefania" amidst the sounds of bombing, with the song also added to the video on TikTok, playing in the background. The text overlaid on the clip emphasizes both the sound and the bombing: "A soldier (Ukrainian

flag emoji) inside the Mariupol steelworks sings Stefania. Under the bombs of (Russian flag emoji). Sound on (loudspeaker emoji)”. According to Clark, musicking can challenge “the acoustic shocks and stressors of war” (2024: 158). In both of the previous examples, diegetic sound is used, albeit in slightly different ways. In the first clip, it is probably aimed at fostering a more positive atmosphere for children, as the music can serve to mask the sounds of war. In the second instance, with the soldier singing, there is a performative element involved, as the soldier is expressing his patriotic sentiments and his readiness to defend his country. Additionally, the role of diegetic sound is to emphasize the reality of the situation, demonstrating that this – the bombing – is really happening, maximizing its emotive impact.

In addition to audio references to bombs, there are also several clips showing distant explosions visually, including the damage that the bombs have created – we are shown burnt and destroyed houses. However, alongside these, there are video clips showing people returning to their wrecked homes, foregrounding the theme of resilience. In these clips, people clean and repair their homes, for example, sweeping the floor with a broom, mopping surfaces, and covering cracks in window glass with duct tape. Many of the videos conclude on a more “optimistic” note, with a clean home or a fridge filled to the brim with food.

This theme includes content that portrays life during wartime, often incorporating diegetic (actual) sound. The diegetic sound is employed to underscore the severity of the situation and amplify affect, which is conveyed through combining “Stefania” with the sound of bombing. However, the diegetic sound is also used to create a more positive atmosphere and likely to mask the acoustic stressors of war, building affinity and resilience.

“Stefania” for disruption: challenging narration by Russians

TikTok allows for creative use of sound, giving users considerable freedom in how they work with audio. However, as Sadler points out, “this free reign also affords the potential loss of agency” since the sound can be reappropriated in an uncontrollable manner (2022: 8). In the corpus,

Russian content creators appropriate the song for their own purposes, challenging the initial Ukrainian material (three times in the corpus).

The first example of sound being used for disruption shows a young woman walking on the street in a selfie-like close-up shot. The text in Russian overlaid on the clip reads: “(yelling head emoji) What are you going to do now in your Russia?” This is followed by scenes of the same young woman casually enjoying herself in various restaurants, eating different dishes, including dessert. The second clip follows a similar idea but differs in execution. It begins with a bird’s-eye view of Red Square, with text at the bottom of the image saying (in Russian originally): “The whole world: to be Russian is shameful! We are ashamed of you.” Subsequently, we are shown highly aestheticized shots of Russia, showcasing its nature, cities, and monuments. The text at the bottom states: “Shame? No! No! Not ashamed. I’m proud to be Russian!” (with Russian flag emoji). Hashtags reinforce the idea of pride #ягоржусь (*yagorzhus*; meaning “I am proud” in English), followed by Russian flag emoji and #горжусьсвоейродиной (*gorzhussvoyeyrodiной*; “proud of my country”) #мненестыдно (*mnene-styдно*; “I am not ashamed”). Interestingly, neither clip disputes the ongoing war, or Russia’s role as the perpetrator, or the fact that people are dying. What is being challenged is that Russia should be ashamed, and that such shame should be individualized.

It can not be said with certainty who the “imagined audiences” (Litt 2012) of these videos are, as I have no data on this. No interviews with content creators were made. However, the fact that these social media users employed a Ukrainian song suggests they sought at least some visibility within Ukrainian TikTok streams (while Russians were targeted via Russian hashtags such as #россия (*rossiya*; “Russia”). The use of a Ukrainian war song for pro-Russian content can be interpreted as a form of trolling. Trolling refers to the act of deliberately provoking, upsetting, or causing disruption in online communities and social media platforms. Trolls often seek to elicit strong emotional reactions from others (eSafety Commissioner 2024).

While I am not studying comment sections in this article, an exception was made for pro-Russian content, as contextualizing posts is

difficult without analysing comments. Most of the comments are largely in agreement with the initial posts. The largest number of comments can be found under the clip with Russian monuments, landscapes and sites – there are 3506 comments. Most of the comments support the initial idea of “pride” via repetition “proud to be Russian” (in Russian: *gorzhus, chto ya russkiy*), “proud of Russia” (*gorzhus Rossiyey*), “the best country” (*samaya luchshaya strana*), often followed by heart, thumbs up or Russian flag emojis. The language in the comment section is mainly Russian. It’s difficult to know whether the commenters are Russians or Ukrainians based on their use of language, as some of the Ukrainian population also speaks Russian.⁴ However, it is clear that the commenters are decidedly pro-Russian. While “Stefania” is likely used to troll Ukrainians, the tone of the language and the choice of emojis in the captions also suggest an aim to build affinity with other pro-Russian social media users, achieved in part by provoking Ukrainians.

“Stefania” for visibility

While hashtags on TikTok serve a scaling function similar to other major platforms, Lang (2024) notes that, in addition to hashtags, sound plays a crucial role in how content gains traction on TikTok. When a particular sound becomes popular, the algorithm is more likely to recommend videos using that sound. To enhance content visibility, users employ popular sounds in their clips (Zulli, Zulli 2022).

Thus, in addition to what the song symbolizes, its widespread use can be attributed to its status as a trending soundtrack at the time. In the corpus, there are six video clips in which “Stefania” has been used but in which the song can be barely heard or not at all. This means that “Stefania” is highlighted on the rotating icon at the bottom of the screen and the clip featured on the page dedicated to videos using the song (which is why it is included in the corpus). However, “Stefania” itself is either muted or barely audible; instead, viewers are presented diegetic (actual) sounds from the environment or, in some instances,

additional non-diegetic audio elements such as a voice-over. As such, it functions as a visibility hack, helping to reach broader audiences, without actually being present as a background sound.

When it comes to text, the clips analysed typically include minimal captions, often consisting of just a single brief sentence or relying solely on emojis. This may be attributable to the video format’s capacity for storytelling through dynamic visuals and overlaid text, which reduces the need for lengthy captions. Today, content creators increasingly adhere to what they perceive as acceptable on social media, keeping their captions on TikTok “short and snappy” (Denote 2023) to maintain the entertainment value of their content (Cervi, Divon 2023). The text on the clips – both in captions and in an overlaid format – include very few calls to action, which is a departure from the typical content related to war on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram (Davidjants 2024). This implies an expectation that the content will scale up through other methods than explicit calls.

In addition to sound, hashtags were also utilized to increase the material’s reach. This is well exemplified in the aforementioned pro-Russian content: while pro-Russian social media users were targeted through hashtags (e.g., *#россия* (*rossiya*; “Russia”)), Ukrainians were presumed to be reached through the use of sound (via “Stefania”). It is common to have multiple imagined audiences for a single post. TikTok affords targeting these varied imagined audiences via a soundtrack and hashtags. This allows for finer targeting strategies, making it possible for the creators to build in-group affinity via targeting (and possibly looping in) the other side of the conflict.

Conclusion

This article examined the role of sound in Ukrainian war-related activism on TikTok, focusing on clips featuring the Ukrainian song “Stefania” by the Kalush Orchestra. 102 clips were thematically analysed. Four broader themes emerged from the analysis.

⁴ According to the 2001 census, approximately 30% of the population spoke Russian as their first language, predominantly in the Eastern region (State Statistics Service of Ukraine 2014).

Firstly, “Stefania” was utilized for national identity building. The sound was used to re-emphasize and expand on the patriotic themes present in the song, expressing national identity through symbols such as the trident from the coat of arms, the Ukrainian flag, the sunflower and the panamka. Identity was also built via the image of the enemy, often personified by Vladimir Putin and sometimes represented by all of Russia. “Hard” topics were conveyed more playfully, in a “softened” form (Cervi, Marín-Lladó 2022), resulting in “playful patriotism” (Chen et al. 2021). Secondly, in content depicting life during the war, diegetic sound was employed for maximizing the material’s affective impact, for instance, via combining “Stefania” with singing and the sound of bombing. However, diegetic sound was also used to create a more positive atmosphere and likely to mask the acoustic stressors of war, building resilience. Thirdly, as the content spreads across platform, controlling its use becomes challenging (Sadler 2022). “Stefania” was appropriated by Russian social media users for their content that challenged the idea that Russians should feel ashamed due to the war. The use of “Stefania” in pro-Russian content can be seen as an effort to build affinity with pro-Russian audiences by provoking Ukrainians. Fourthly, the sound was employed by Ukrainian social media users in a muted or barely audible form, which served as a hack for visibility. Thus, as this analysis has shown, sound on TikTok is not monolithic. There are uses of both diegetic and non-diegetic sound and their combination, and these serve different functions.

The affordance of sound shapes activism on the platform by amplifying affect. However, the activism on TikTok has a certain playful tone (Cervi, Marín-Lladó 2022; Chen et al. 2021). TikTok fosters a sense of community by allowing users to collaborate, reinforcing “imagined communities” online (Anderson 2006 [1983]). “Stefania” serves

as a focal point for these collaborations, as the song is “ours” (Bohlman 2001). The “feeling of community and solidarity” (Fackler 2010 cited in Clark 2024) contributes to both identity and affinity building. However, as TikTok makes it easy to appropriate sound, the in-group affinity building can be easily disrupted by the other side of the conflict.

Limitations

This article is based on the qualitative analysis of 102 clips, which, though a relatively small corpus, allowed for an in-depth examination – serving as both a limitation and an advantage. Future studies could expand to include a larger corpus or select multiple background songs for comparison. Such studies could benefit from mixed methods, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to accommodate a larger corpus while maintaining the depth of analysis characteristic of qualitative studies.

Furthermore, the focus of this study was on the audio-visual material itself, without examining other sites of meaning-making such as production, audiencing, or circulation (see Rose 2016). Comments were not analysed, except for those under pro-Russian content; however, this included only comments under a small number of posts. Future studies could explore these additional sites of meaning-making via conducting interviews with content creators to see how they conceptualize their activities (site of production) and analysing comments on audio-visual clips to study user engagement (site of audiencing).

Lastly, as the analysis of the material showed, both diegetic and non-diegetic sound is used on the platform, sometimes in combination. Future studies could explore the layering of sounds in greater detail to better understand their distinct roles in online activism.

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„Stefania” identiteediloomes, vastupanus ja trollimisel: Heli roll TikToki sõjaaktivismis

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Jaana Davidjants

Artiklis uuritakse heli rolli sõjaga seotud aktivismis platvormil TikTok. Juhtumiuuringuks on valitud 2022. aasta Eurovisiooni lauluvõistluse võitja Kalush Orchestra laul „Stefania”, mis on kujunenud ukrainlaste poolel Venemaa-Ukraina sõja aegseks *soundtrack*’iks (Post 2024). Tänapäeval rulluvad sõjad lahti lisaks füüsilistele lahinguväljadele ka sotsiaalmeedia platvormidel. TikTok on viimastel aastatel olnud sõjaaktivismi esirinnas. Kuna tegu on suhteliselt uue platvormiga, on endiselt vähe uuringuid, milles vaadeldakse TikToki rolli sõjaga seotud liikumistes ja aktivismis, kuid on ka erandeid (vt. nt. Hautea jt. 2021; Zhao, Abidin 2023; Cervi, Divon 2023; Primig jt. 2023). See artikkel tugineb olemasolevatele uuringutele, keskendudes heli rollile TikToki konfliktiga seotud aktivismi puhul.

Artikli teoreetilise raamistiku moodustavad sotsiaalmeedia, aktivismi, rahvuslikkuse ja heli uuringud. 102 klipi temaatilise analüüsi põhjal (Braun, Clarke 2006), milles kasutatakse „Stefania” lugu, ilmnes neli laiemat teemat. **Esiteks** kasutati „Stefaniat” rahvuslikuks identiteediloomeks, täpsemalt, rõhutati ja laiendati laulus sisalduvaid patriootilisi teemasid, väljendades rahvuslikku identiteeti sümbolite kaudu, nagu näiteks Ukraina lipp, päevalill ja panamka-müts. Identiteeti kujundati ka vaenlase pildi kaudu, keda sageli kehastas Vladimir Putin, aga mõnikord ka Venemaa. Raskeid teemasid edastati mängulisemalt, pehmemdatud vormis (Cervi, Marín-Lladó 2022). Näeme klippides kasse väikeste panamkade ja superkangelase keepidega – viisil, mis sobib TikToki ainulaadse kultuuriga, mille tulemuseks on „mänguline patriotism” (Chen jt. 2021). **Teiseks**, sõjaaegset elu kujutavas sisus (nii sõdurite kui ka tsiviilisikute hulgas) kasutati tihti mittediegeetilise heli kõrval (lihtsalt *soundtrack*) ka diegeetilist heli (tegelik heli, näiteks kellegi kõne või sammud). Seeläbi maksimeeriti materjali emotsionaalset mõju, nimelt kombineerides „Stefania” *soundtrack*’i päris pommitamise helidega. Samuti kasutati laulu positiivsema õhkkonna loomiseks ja tõenäoliselt sõja akustiliste stressitegurite varjamiseks, näiteks lastes lastel sõjavarjendis „Stefaniale” kaasa laulda, aidates tugevdada toimetulekuvõimet. **Kolmandaks**, kui sisu platvormil levib, muutub ka selle kasutamise kontrollimine keeruliseks (Sadler 2022). „Stefania” „omastasid” Vene sotsiaalmeedia kasutajad, kes seadsid oma sisus küsimuse alla Ukraina narratiivid ning vastandusid ideele, et venelased peaksid sõja pärast häbi tundma. „Stefania” kasutamist venemeelse sisu jaoks võib näha katsena luua seotust laiemaga vene publikuga, tehes seda osaliselt ukrainlaste provotseerimise kaudu. **Neljandaks** rakendasid ukrainlastest sotsiaalmeedia kasutajad heli summutatud või vaevu kuuldaval kujul. Nii toimis „Stefania” nähtavuse „häkina” – laulu kasutus aitas jõuda oma sõnumiga laiemaga publikuni, olgugi et taustahelina polnud seda peaaegu kuulda.

Nagu analüüs näitas, ei ole heli TikToki monoliitne. Sõjaaktivismis kasutatakse nii diegeetilist kui ka mittediegeetilist heli ja nende kombinatsioone, millel on erinevad funktsioonid. Tulevased uuringud võiksid vaadelda helide kihistumist üksikasjalikumalt, et paremini mõista nende erinevaid rolle veebipõhises aktivismis.