

Manipulative mechanisms and reasons behind sharing fake news during Russo-Ukrainian War: A three-fold study

Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı sırasında sahte haber paylaşımının arkasındaki manipülatif mekanizmalar ve nedenleri: Üç aşamalı bir çalışma

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Abstract

In a crisis, an individual's critical thinking is incapacitated, as the extreme circumstances put them in distress. Consequently, to overcome the panic and create an optimistic environment, any information that is apprehensible under these conditions becomes effortlessly shareable. The Russo-Ukrainian War of the 21st century has proved to be such a crisis and a trigger for disinformation. The study led to significant results concerning the characteristics of pseudo-positive false information during war and the psychology of its sharing. By analyzing the sources of fake news published on *Facebook*, integrated with a survey of 300 Georgians and two focus groups, research concludes that Russian propaganda in Georgia during the Russo-Ukrainian War was strong. Despite this, Georgian social media users display an inclination for positive information about Ukraine, a preference rooted in a perceived common enemy and a shared sense of camaraderie with Ukrainians. By scrutinizing the influences of pseudo-positive fake news, research also identifies the main and most effective manipulators and triggers operating during the war. A noteworthy discovery is the active dissemination of anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian fake news by the Russian propaganda and disinformation machine in Georgian social media, fueling a Infodemic.

Keywords: Disinformation, pseudo-positivity, social media, Russo-Ukrainian War, manipulation

Öz

Bir kriz anında, ekstrem koşullar bireyi sıkıntı içerisine soktuğundan, bireyin eleştirel düşünme yetisi devre dışı kalır. Dolayısıyla, paniği aşmak ve iyimser bir ortam yaratmak için bu koşullar altında anlaşılabilir olan her türlü bilgi rahatlıkla paylaşılabılır hale gelir. 21. yüzyılın Rusya Ukrayna Savaşı ise böyle bir kriz ve dezenformasyon için tetikleyici bir olgu olduğunu kanıtlamıştır. Bu çalışma, savaş

sirasında ortaya çıkan sahte enformasyonun özellikleri ve bunların paylaşılmasındaki psikolojiye ilişkin oldukça önemli sonuçlar ortaya koymuştur. *Facebook*'ta yayınlanan sahte haberlerin kaynaklarını analiz ederek, 300 Gürcü ile yapılan bir anket ve iki odak grubu ile entegre edilen araştırma, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı sırasında Gürcistan'da, Rus propagandasının güçlü olduğu sonucuna varmıştır. Buna rağmen, Gürcü sosyal medya kullanıcılarının Ukrayna hakkında olumlu bilgilere eğilim gösterdiği ve bu tercihin temelinde ortak düşman algısı ve Ukraynalılarla paylaşılan

yoldaşlık duygusu yattığı görülmüştür. Sahte haberlerin etkilerini inceleyen araştırma, savaş sırasında faaliyet gösteren ana ve en etkili manipulatörleri ve tetikleyicileri de belirlemiştir. Rus propaganda ve dezenformasyon makinesinin Gürcistan sosyal medyasında Ukrayna karşıtı ve Rusya yanlısı sahte haberleri aktif bir şekilde yayması ve dezenfodemiye körüklemesi ise araştırmanın saptadığı diğer bir kayda değer bulgudur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Dezenformasyon, sözde olumluluk, sosyal medya, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, manipülasyon

Introduction

The history of fake news, misinformation and manipulation spans centuries and has existed in almost every stage of human evolution in varying doses - even in ancient Rome (MacDonald, 2017). For example, during the World Wars, this type of concept was known as "disinformation," and "freak journalism," or "yellow journalism" in the Spanish War, which dates back to 1896 (Pauly & Campbell, 2002). It is definite that, in the course of every war, there is a discernible escalation in the prevalence of misinformation and propaganda.

Some researchers assert that the taxonomy and definition of fake news extend beyond the general concept of news. Based on the analysis of scientists' opinions, the paper states that fake news is a type of misinformation (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Allen et al. 2020). International researchers also note that fake news has already reached other levels. A guide issued by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2018 states that fake news includes disinformation (harmful information that contains manipulative content) and misinformation (information that is false but not intended to cause harm). There is also a third form - malinformation, which is rooted in reality but strategically deployed to harm individuals, social groups, organizations, or countries (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018, p. 46).

Disinformation seems to be an ancient art, but technology has taken it to another level (Chesney & Citron, 2018). Nevertheless, scientists argue that we still need to study fake news in depth and understand what it is (Watson, 2018). Recent studies show that

“social media has played an active role in the spread of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) infodemic” (Oğuz & Öztürk, 2022, p. 83), as nowadays social media is often neutral towards verifying information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Information changes/repeats itself so quickly and reaches the consumer that its critical analysis seems impossible (Fazio et al., 2015). Social networks and online media have taken the speed of information sharing to another level. The influence the media possesses on the public and the formation of their opinion has increased considerably. People believe the information shared by their acquaintances, friends and/or liked/subscribed platforms (Murphy, 2017). The susceptibility of individuals to believe in disinformation highlights a growing and concerning form of manipulation.

Scholars have approached the definition of manipulation from various perspectives, considering it as a social influence tactic, a form of psychological control, or a strategic communication tool. Notably, Cialdini (2009) identifies six principles of influence, including reciprocity, commitment, and authority, shedding light on the nuanced nature of manipulative strategies.

Watson (2018) also argues that a story/post shared by friends/relatives has a significant impact, although another group of scholars note that even when information is shared by friends, the users still choose the story that they need. The information resource demand and supply model assumes that the typical news consumers have two main characteristics: First, they want to receive reliable information and understand the objective truth about the world; Second, the consumers have a demand for news that fits their worldviews and desires (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). The latter is closely related to the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) (Giles, 2010) and the Rational Choice Theory (RCT).

Some illiterate social media users write, create and disseminate information through online media. According to studies, they even use traditional media, and sources for confirmation (Molina et al., 2019). This is troubling and dangerous given that people are more likely to trust information that matches their beliefs and knowledge, which in turn exacerbates the impact as misinformation matches opinion and experience (Bode & Vraga, 2015).

As early as 1977, scientists at Stanford University discovered the “truth effect,” according to which a message that a user has already heard or read is more credible

than new information (Hasher et al., 1977). Recent studies in the field of psychology have shown that people perceive the true story as what they most often understand or see (Fazio et al., 2015). All of this indicates to some degree that the users are dependent on visual manipulators and trust the information or platform that they see the most and is shared by their friends (Silverman, 2016). The reliance on manipulators remains evident when examining today's media landscape in the context of war. Crises often induce a high level of uncertainty, leading people to share fake news as a way to make sense of the situation or fill information gaps, even if the information is inaccurate (Starbird et al., 2014). As Geissler et al. stated (2023), Russian propaganda campaigns and specific manipulators are used to shape the narrative around the war. On the one hand, the Russian government enforced new legislation to exert power over traditional media outlets, compelling citizens to support the war. As a result, domestic media outlets are coerced into adopting the official narrative.

During times of war, conflicting parties may engage in information warfare, using propaganda to manipulate public opinion. Fake news becomes a tool to disseminate misleading narratives, influence perceptions, and weaken the morale of opponents (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in 2014, has had profound geopolitical implications for Eastern Europe and the wider international community. One of the more insidious consequences of this conflict has been the propagation of fake news and disinformation, which have not only influenced the course of the war but have also spread to neighboring countries, including Georgia.

War has showcased the weaponization of information and disinformation by both Russian and Ukrainian actors. Russian state-sponsored media outlets, such as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, have been instrumental in disseminating propaganda and false narratives to advance Moscow's interests. On the Ukrainian side, social media and online platforms have been utilized to counteract Russian disinformation (Rid, 2019).

On the other hand, Russian propaganda is suspected of influencing countries beyond its borders, particularly through the use of social media to foster hostility against the West. Instances of Russian propaganda have been documented in several Western countries during past conflicts as well (Alieva et al., 2022; Geissler et al., 2023).

The rise of social media platforms and their potential for spreading disinformation have been central to the information war in Ukraine. The authors examined the use of

social media by various actors, including Russian troll farms and Ukrainian activists, to disseminate fake news and shape public opinion. Social media's role in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War has relevance to understanding the spread of fake news in Georgia (Babacan & Tam, 2022).

Georgia, a country near the conflict zone, has not been immune to the spread of disinformation related to the Russo-Ukrainian War. Russian state-sponsored media outlets, as well as websites linked to the Kremlin, have actively targeted the Georgian population with disinformation campaigns (Sirbiladze, 2019). Georgia's vulnerabilities to disinformation campaigns are linked to its complex geopolitical situation. The country's ongoing territorial conflicts, including the situations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have made it particularly susceptible to information warfare tactics. Moreover, the lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills in Georgia's population has further exacerbated the issue (Media Development Foundation, 2022).

It is crucial to understand that spreading false information may lead to a new wave of conflict. A good example of this is the Rwandan genocide (Odergon, 2008). Also, misinformation easily leads to racist and intolerant actions in society and instills hate speech and xenophobia (Cerase & Santoro, 2018).

But why is fake news still shareable and what positive benefits can social media users gain from sharing them during the crisis? War-induced stress has led to psychological distress, generalized anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Rajkumar, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In emergencies, positive information is very important and often necessary to maintain an optimistic mood and gain hope (Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2012). This fact is automatically linked to our theories - people choose certain information at a specific moment according to their needs. Researchers explore concepts such as persuasion, deception, and emotional intelligence to understand how individuals are susceptible to manipulation (Tucker et al., 2018).

Sharing 'useful' or 'positive' content proves to social network users that they are valuable. Accordingly, they get motivated as they get pleasure and satisfaction from positive feedback and comments. *The New York Times* conducted an extensive study that is rather relevant today, which examined the psychology of online sharing. As a result of the research, they formulated five main motivators for sharing:

1. People want to improve someone else's life (94%)
2. People want the content to reflect their identity (68%)
3. People want to grow their relationships and communicate (80%)
4. People share content as they like the feeling they manifest when others write comments under their posts or when a certain post has high engagement (81%)
5. People want to spread information about what they believe (84%) (The New York Times, 2019).

In emergencies, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War, critical circumstances arise that induce distress among social media users, leading them to inadvertently propagate misinformation they perceive as positive.

Given the escalated Russian propaganda that the underlying circumstances have activated, the significance of Georgian social media research has amplified. Furthermore, if one considers the historical context - Russia's occupation of 20% of Georgia's territories - it becomes indubitably vital to study this issue in the Georgian core. 2022 Meta transparency reports show that Georgia is one of the top 15 countries targeted by the Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior networks. In addition, Georgia is a multi-ethnic country - over 13% of the population (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2014) is represented by ethnic minorities, who often become targets of new waves of disinformation. Thus, to protect their rights and reduce ethnic or religious strife, it is critical to research these types of false information.

Today, amid the Russo-Ukrainian War, the concerned parties are actively utilizing manipulative tactics to create positive/negative images, establish heroic identities, or propagate xenophobic views. Therefore, examining the structure of the false information by which the Georgian social media environment is saturated is crucial in demonstrating the employed manipulation mechanisms, the rationale for sharing these topics, and the ramifications that the fake news brings.

Aim and methodology

The study aims to discern the aforementioned details concerning the spread of misinformation. The primary focus of the article lies in analyzing the impact of fake news, the reasons behind sharing pseudo-positive false information and their influence on social media users' behavior.

Considering that we examine false information consisting of positive context, we use the term 'pseudo-positive false information,' which refers to information saturated with false positives. For example, the following information is pseudo-positive for the population of Georgia: "Ukraine has already won the war, and next will be Georgia," "Russia has retreated and is giving the territories back to Georgia." We explained the term to the media experts, psychologists, and other specialists involved in the study, and they concurred with and endorsed the term- 'pseudo-positive.' Therefore, our research will adopt the term 'pseudo-positive,' as it most accurately encapsulates the essence and content of false information in such cases.

Depending on the assumption that Georgians shared pseudo-positive information about Ukraine, following research questions were developed:

1. What types of manipulations were utilized in Georgian social media during the course of the war?
2. What types of manipulators are most influential among social media users (photos, titles, stereotypes, historical context)?
3. What kinds of false information are shared by Georgian social media users (negative news about Russia and positive news about Ukraine or vice-versa)?
4. Why do social media users share misinformation about the war?
5. What impact does fake news have on social media users?

Social media, in particular, *Facebook* and the sources of false information published on this platform were selected as research subjects. The study took place over eight months - from February 24 to September 24.

In order to get the best results for social media research with aspects of media psychology, the authors have adopted topic-based methods, which are recommended in the book "*Media Psychology*" by field expert Giles (2010). To accomplish our goals and address the research questions, we employed a comprehensive research methodology, encompassing quantitative research in the form of a survey involving 300 Georgian social media users, as well as qualitative and quantitative content analysis of 106 fake publications. Additionally, after receiving the ethical permissions the authors conducted two focus groups.

The study investigates the manipulative mechanisms behind 106 instances of misinformation shared on *Facebook*, identified through a dedicated section on Ukraine within a Georgian fact-check organization's webpage (FactCheck). The engagement of this information was tracked and verified using the CrowdTangle application, which identified these publications as having the highest engagement during the war. An acceptable level of inter-coder reliability was found among assessors. Additionally, to understand the type of information actively shared by Georgian social media users, we devised a specialized survey consisting of 20 questions to identify user behavior during a crisis. To gather responses, an online survey was administered by distributing questionnaires to 300 respondents in Georgia through various online communication platforms.

Research shows that conducting experiments within a focus group is highly effective in media psychology, allowing the researcher to directly observe participants' reactions, facial expressions and actions (Giles, 2010). Accordingly, we organized two focus groups, each with 10 participants, to visually assess the impact. Focus groups were conducted on the same day - June 24, 2022 - with a 1-hour interval, lasting 65 minutes for the first group and 95 minutes for the second group. Participants in the groups were chosen to reflect age diversity and maintain gender balance, as determined by a preliminary survey. The key criterion was that participants should not have a background in the media. Consequently, 20 individuals were selected through a *Facebook* poll, with 10 participants in each group.

Alongside the researcher, a psychologist¹ also participated, observing the participants' behavior. This unique method provided insights into the effects of fake news and manipulations on social media users and, when combined with relevant theories, contributed to comprehensive answers and findings.

Scientists point out (Talwar et al, 2019) and the scientific papers we have analyzed also confirm that the study of false information requires a complex use of theories and research methods of media psychology and mass communication. Thus the research was based on several relevant theories that scientists use to study social media and user behaviour. These are: UGT, the RCT, and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

UGT based on traditional psychological theory, but is also widely used in mass communication research. Under this approach, the viewers (or media users in general) control the information that they receive. Accordingly, UGT researchers observe the motives for selecting and using specific content by the user (Giles, 2010). According to Berger, "Researchers focus on how the audience uses the media, not how the media affects the audience" (Berger, 1995).

Consequently, in the imperative task of overcoming a depressive state with positive information during a crisis such as war, consumers, as posited by UGT, actively seek and discover information that aids them in coping with stress.

SDT studies human motivation (Deci et al, 2012). By general observation, it resembles UGT, however, it is more suited to the positioning of the user on social media. In the context of our research, users' competence and image are elevated both in the eyes of their friends and on social media when they share information that garners positive feedback. The war can be perceived as a challenge, and the solution may involve social media users regarding the act of sharing 'useful' information with their friends, aiming to assist them while emphasizing their importance in the process.

According to RCT people make choices based on what maximizes their gain (Becker, 1976). The path that an individual chooses should bring them maximum satisfaction (which is also a benefit) (Center of Social Sciences, 2004). It is also argued that RCT is manifested in the use of social media where the user is consciously active on the network in anticipation of positive results (Logan et al., 2018). This phenomenon becomes particularly pronounced during the war, as individuals actively navigate social media with the expectation of positive outcomes, demonstrating the applicability of RCT in this context.

Findings

Building upon an analysis of thematic scientific literature, relevant theories and false publications, the primary outcomes of the research were systematically organized under relevant subheadings. This categorization facilitated the identification of clear and concise answers to the research questions. The results were methodically grouped in alignment with the respective research inquiries, enhancing the overall coherence and structure of the findings.

Throughout the research period, leveraging the *FactCheck* platform in Georgia, we meticulously identified and selected 106 instances of misinformation. These were scrutinized for engagement using the *CrowdTangle* application, focusing on their popularity during the period and dissemination through the social network *Facebook*. All 106 publications underwent thorough analysis and were categorized by topic; however, a subset comprising 36 publications, representing every third publication among the 106, was specifically chosen for in-depth title analysis.

Topics and headlines of fake information

Following the examination of 106 instances of false information, it became apparent that during the Russo-Ukrainian War, falsification on Georgian social media primarily occurred in four directions: anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-Georgian. Notably, there are several instances of pro-Ukrainian fake news (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of fabricated publications by topic

Subject of fabrication	Number
anti-Ukraine *Actions, attitudes, or statements that are opposed to or hostile toward Ukraine, its people, culture or interests. This can manifest in various ways, including political, social, cultural or economic dimensions. Ex. "Ukrainians are orchestrating a genocide in Donbas"	45 (42%)
pro-Russian *Actions and information that express support for or align with the interests of Russia. Ex. "Russia does not start Wars"	34 (32%)
anti-Western * Content, narratives or communication that portrays a negative or critical view of Western countries, their values, policies, institutions or culture. This term is often used in the context of geopolitical discussions, information warfare or propaganda. Ex. "The United States of America (USA) started the Russo-Ukraine War"	5 (5%)
anti-Georgian *Same as anti-Western but in context of Georgia. Ex. "Georgian fighters aligned on the side of Ukrainian Nazis"	6 (6%)
pro-Ukrainian * Information that supports Ukraine Ex. "The war has begun, Mariupol is being bombed"	3 (3%)
Other Ex. "Germany has admitted that Ukraine and Georgia will not be accepted into North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union.	13 (12%)

The data (Table 1) indicates the active involvement of Russian propaganda in Georgia. Throughout the research period (February 24/2022, to September 24/2022), out of the 106 widely circulated fake publications, 45 were found to be anti-Ukrainian, while 34 were identified as pro-Russian. The percentage breakdown (Table 1) reveals that only 3% of the misinformation flow is pro-Ukrainian, whereas a substantial 84% aligns with Russian propaganda, which in total can be considered pro-Russian, as content perceived as detrimental to Ukraine or the Western side is inherently regarded as favorable to Russia.

The analysis of the headlines is particularly noteworthy when considering this percentage distribution, as it indicates that the content of the information is mostly hidden in this context. Anti-Ukraine messages in the headlines can be given as follows: "The Kharkiv government building was bombed by Ukrainian rockets," "Ukrainian soldiers employ civilians as human shields," "A residential building in Kyiv was damaged by a rocket fired by Ukraine," "Zelensky and his entourage left Kyiv on February 25," "Zelensky and his entourage left Kyiv on February 25," "The military operation in Ukraine is aimed at fighting Nazism and Facism," "The military operation in Ukraine is aimed at fighting Nazism and Fascism," "Ukrainians are orchestrating a genocide in Donbas," "President Zelensky did not visit the wounded soldiers," "Disinformation: The BBC admitted that the attack on Kramatorsk was carried out by Ukraine," "The purpose of the French investigative expert group is to cover up war crimes committed by Ukraine," "Ukraine was orchestrating a genocide in Donbas for 8 years," "In the first days of Russia's 'special military operation'" [in Ukraine], all of Ukraine's air defense systems were out of order," "Ukrainians assaulted Oleksiy Goncharenko," "Zelensky is a drug addict," "Many European countries refused to accept Ukrainian refugees due to venereal diseases."

Through content analysis of 45 publications, 15 titles were selected. The analysis unveiled that anti-Ukrainian messages predominantly spread in two directions:

1. Portraying the Ukrainian side (including the president) as weak (n=5)

Frequently, false information emerges with a central message that "the armed forces of Ukraine surrendered their weapons," "Zelensky has left Kyiv," "all of Ukraine's air defense systems were out of order," "Zelensky is a drug addict."

These narrative attempts to shape the perception of the Ukrainian side as weak, with the mentioned phraseology diminishing hope and positive impulses on psychological and subconscious levels.

2. Depicting the Ukrainian side as 'criminal and terrorist' (n=10)

Information about the creation of the mentioned 'enemy icon' predominates, frequently featuring phrases such as "Ukraine carried out," "Ukraine was orchestrating a genocide," "Nazis and Fascists" and "Ukrainians bombed."

The evident trend in the second dominant part of the misinformation flow is directed towards depicting the Ukrainian side as the 'culprit' in the war, casting it as the aggressor and crafting a narrative that positions Russia as a victim. Similar patterns emerge in the anti-Western and anti-Georgian examples, where efforts are made to identify the party responsible for the conflict and paint the Georgian side as the 'aggressor.'

As previously noted, anti-Western false publications share a common narrative in their titles, claiming that the USA initiated the War, thereby framing the West as culpable, for example, "The USA started the Russo-Ukraine War." Conversely, Anti-Georgian publications showcase a broader range of narratives, including depictions of Georgian fighters aligning with Ukrainian Nazis, placing them on the perceived 'wrong' side. We can see those narratives in titles like - "Georgian fighters aligned on the side of Ukrainian Nazis." Additionally, they portray Russians facing mistreatment at the Russo-Georgian border, where they are pressured to recognize the Russian Federation as the aggressor. Furthermore, exploring pro-Russian messages is intriguing, as they depict Russia as a hero, emphasizing themes of heroism and humanism in their content.

Pro-Russian messages in the headlines can given as follows: "Russia tried to negotiate with Ukraine for months, but Zelensky threatened to raise hell," "Russian army liberates Ukrainian cities," "Russia does not start wars," "Western countries are surprised by the level of Russian training and the combat efficiency of their army," "Photographs depicting the capture of Kharkiv by Russia," "Russia does not kill civilians in Ukraine and 70% of Georgian population wants Russia," "No air attack was carried out by the Russian army on the Mariupol hospital," "Russia does not bomb civilian structures," "Russians treat Ukrainian prisoners of war in the most humane way," and "Russians 'referendums' were recognized by international observers."

Pro-Russian fake content mainly spreads with one aim - Russia as a symbol of peace. We actively encounter such phrases as "Russia does not start wars," "liberates cities," "does not kill civilians," "does not bomb," and "Russians exhibit humane behavior."

During the research period, the sole identified pro-Ukraine video hoax - "The war has begun, Mariupol is being bombed" - actually includes footage of a lightning strike instead of the purported bombing. However, the comments and public reaction to this publication exhibit starkly different reactions, as discerned in the survey and focus group.

Manipulative mechanisms

The analysis of publications indicates that the primary manipulative mechanisms employed by the Russian propaganda machine involve the construction of 'hero' and 'enemy' icons, essentially engaging in a process of demonization. Edward Bernays (2004) frequently discussed this manipulation mechanism. The demonization of individuals or groups is indeed a manipulation tactic that has been employed throughout history for various purposes. This tactic was often used in the Soviet period as well. During the Cold War Soviet media regularly portrayed the capitalist West, particularly the USA, as a hostile and aggressive force seeking to undermine the achievements of the Soviet Union. Western countries were depicted as imperialistic and warmongering, while the virtues of communism were emphasized (Beloff, 1951).

Each Russian propaganda publication is replete with disinformation narratives, as other sources confirm. Russian propaganda often spreads false or misleading information to create confusion and shape public opinion.

Hence, upon comparing Russian propaganda with its Soviet predecessor, it becomes apparent that similar manipulative mechanisms persist to this day. Among these manipulative tactics are the distortion of historical context and the instigation of fear, as exemplified in the statement from Georgia: "70% of the population of Georgia wants Russia," "On the Russo-Georgian border, Russian citizens are asked to recognize the Russian Federation as the aggressor," "Evelyn Farkas calls on Georgia to start a war against Russia."

It is known that Russia provides energy resources to Georgia. Hence, the manipulation claiming that “Russia no longer supplies Europe with energy resources” is designed to instill fear, possibly influencing other countries’ decisions based on this misinformation. Simultaneously, the assertion that “Many European countries refused to accept Ukrainian refugees due to venereal diseases” also sows fear. This suggests a potential spread of disease in Georgia, where aggression may emerge against Ukrainian refugees and they may no longer be allowed to cross the border due to perceived ‘disease.’

To conclude, we can say that the content analysis identified the following manipulative mechanisms: demonization, fear manipulation, anti-Western and, in this case, anti-Ukrainian propaganda and gaslighting.

The percentage distribution indicates that Russian propaganda in Georgia is strong, as evident in the topic and nature of fabricated publications. The second inquiry delves into the influence of this information on society and the purpose behind sharing news of similar content. The response to this question emerged through the survey and focus groups.

Facebook users’ preferences in sharing information

To specify social media users’ preferences in sharing information, a special questionnaire was developed consisting of 20 questions. 300 social media users took part in the survey. Gender balance is more or less preserved, 55.9% of the participants are female and 44.1% are male. Moreover, there are representatives of different age groups: (34.8% - 15-24); (36.8% - 25-40); (24% - 41-60); (4.4% - 60+).

In order to make the survey accessible to many, including the regions of Georgia, a *Facebook* advertising function - boost - was used. Therefore, if we take into account the percentage of answers and the possibility of error, which is 2-3% by the calculations, we can say that we have obtained reliable and satisfactory results, which can be utilized for reaching appropriate conclusions.

During the survey, participants were given the opportunity to choose which information to share in a crisis. They also had to explain why they made that choice. 74% (n=222) of the participants expressed a preference for pseudo-positive information about Ukraine. In this case, individuals who shared pseudo-positive information explained that, in this particular circumstance, it is more beneficial to disseminate

positive information about Ukraine and avoid sharing any information about Russia. Those 23% (n=69) of participants who shared negative news emphasized that Russia is the enemy, expressing a desire to share this with everyone. It is notable, that only 3% (n=9) shared pseudo-positive information about Russia.

As a second case respondents were given two types of falsifications - pseudo-positive information about Ukraine and negative about Russia and were asked what they would do after seeing this information on social media.

In the case of pseudo-positive information about Ukraine, 54% of respondents answered that they would not react, 22% said they would like it and 20% would share it. In the instance of pseudo-positive information about Russia, 78% of the participants choose the answer - "I would not react," 12% say that they would comment and only 8% would share. Upon analyzing the comments of the 12%, it is notable that they commonly express sentiments such as "This is misinformation," or "Of course, this is false information, so I would write that it is fake." By examining the answers it becomes evident that a larger number of participants tend to share and like pseudo-positive information about Ukraine.

To ascertain whether negative information about Russia is highly associated with falsification or not, we provide two post to participant: Real information about Russian military and fake information about Ukraine facing losses. In this case, participants were asked to discern real information. Even when accurate information is presented about the Russian military, Georgian media users (29%, n=87) exhibit skepticism or a reluctance to believe. Instead, the 71% (n=213) of participants promptly opt for pseudo-positive information about Ukraine.

Respondents also had the opportunity to identify the main provoking/enticing factor that led them to focus on a particular publication and share it. 23% of the respondents (n=69) state that only the title is attractive and intriguing to them. The majority of social media users (66.2%, n=198) report that the combination of the title and the photo attracts their attention. The majority of social media users (66.2%, n=192) report that the combination of the title and the photo attracts their attention.

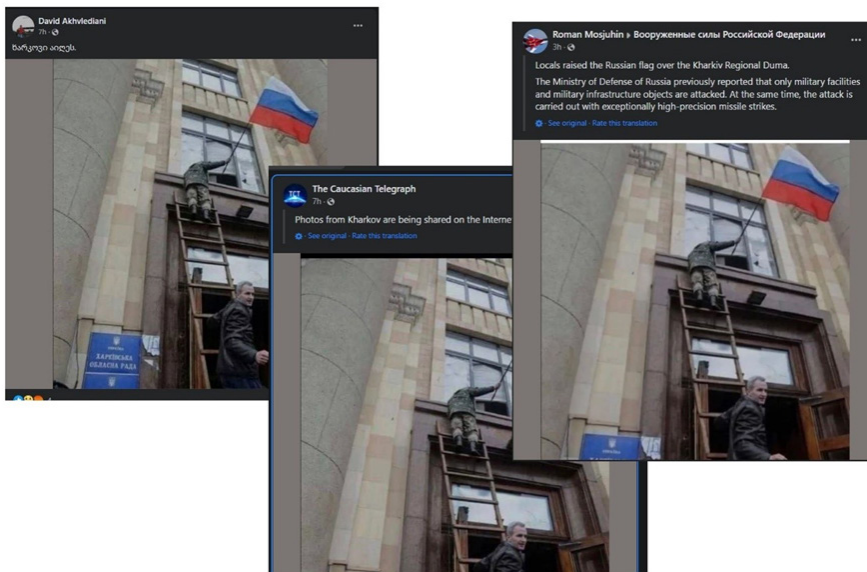


Figure 1: The photo which seems to depict the capture of Kharkov by Russia was taken in 2014

In the falsified post (Figure 1), circulated during the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, the Georgian title “Capture of Kharkov” accompanies the image, suggesting the victorious act of raising the Russian flag by military personnel. A closer inspection reveals that the photograph supposedly depicts the capture of Kharkov by Russia in 2014 and manipulated in the present to convey ‘positive’ information about Russia. The explicit correlation between the title and the outdated image is apparent.

Content analysis made it evident that the pseudo-positive false information is characterized by a close relation and logical connection between the headline and the accompanying photograph. This strategic manipulation was chosen by the majority of respondents, as validated by the findings presented in Figure 2.

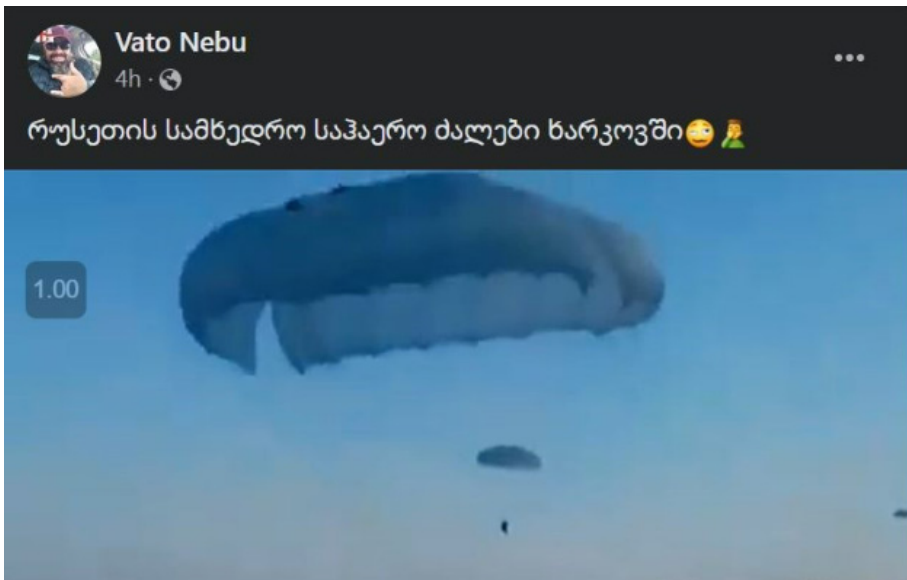


Figure 2: The photo was taken in 2016 when Russian forces landed in the Russian city of Rostov

The fake image (Figure 2), paired with the Georgian inscription “Russian military air forces in Kharkov,” originated in Rostov in 2016. This act of manipulation involves presenting an older image with a new title, suggesting a current occurrence, strategically designed to highlight Russia’s military prowess and evoke a sense of threat among the audience. It is crucial to emphasize that the image lacks the potential to impact social media users significantly without the accompanying appropriate title.



Figure 3: The photos show President Volodymyr Zelenskyi wearing a helmet with a picture of US President Joseph Biden hanging above his chair taking cocaine.

Frequently, the headlines are paired with photographs that negatively portray the president. It was subsequently determined that the photos were screenshots from an AI-generated video, once again underscoring the impact of technological advancements on the proliferation of fake news. Another instance of falsification featuring identical content (Figure 4) further emphasizes the concerning implications of such manipulations.



Figure 4: Fake photo of president Zelenskyy

If we deduce the results of content analysis, we can conclude that this type of falsification has more influence, as the manner and the tone are exhibited in the title itself, which is caused by the relevant words and photo. And since the title and the photo together carry a clear message, there is no need to follow the link - the user shares the information based on the 'idea' perceived by combining these two components. It is crucial to emphasize that, for Georgian social media users, the key manipulation tool and driving force behind their information choices is the 'historical context' and past events. This subconscious influence becomes apparent through the choices made by respondents and other social media users. It can be inferred that, due to the Russo-Georgian conflict and Russia's occupation of 20% of Georgia, the Georgian public tends to find every form of anti-Russian information acceptable.

To explain the emotional effects and reasons for sharing pseudo-positive information, we conducted focus groups with constructed small experiments.

Attractiveness of positive news in times of war

To explain the act of sharing pseudo-positive false information by social media users in the time of war, we conducted two focus groups (10-10 participants) that included a small experiment. The process was observed by a psychologist, who assessed the reactions of the participants.

Focus group participants became presumed *Facebook* users and others - their '*Facebook* friends'. Participants had the opportunity to share and comment on each others' posts. Three types of false information were fabricated for the experiment: Pro-Russian: Russia tried to negotiate with Ukraine for months, but Zelensky threatened to raise hell; Anti-Ukraine: Ukraine was orchestrating a genocide in Donbas for 8 years; Anti-Russian: Russia gives up its positions.

The task involved deciding which information to share. Lastly, participants were required to articulate the primary reason that compelled them to click on the share button. Seven participants of the first group shared positive news about Ukraine and three participants shared negative news about Russia. According to them, the main reason for sharing the positive information was the desire to share the 'good' news with others, thus giving everyone the opportunity to experience the positive developments. For these participants pro-Ukrainian information, even if it is fake, is considered to be positive. In the case of negative information, participants highlighted that they would share it only to warn others.

The key is that those who shared positive information received positive feedback from their 'friends' such as "thank you," "good," "I'm glad" and more. The psychologist noted that while receiving these comments, the author of the post was smiling and nodding in agreement.

In the instance of the negative post, the second author received the following comments: "False," "I'm not interested in so much negativity," "We are tired," etc. While reading these comments, the author received no benefit - sitting in silence, facial expressions and gestures remained unchanged. One of the participants explained their choice to share the pseudo-positive information by stating that the news could give readers a moment of relief and create an optimistic atmosphere/positive state of mind. The main finding is that Georgian participants explain how positive news about Ukraine

is automatically perceived as positive information about Georgia, given the historical context of the Russian occupation of Georgian territories.

Authors, examining dispositional and situational optimism's impact on mood, assert that optimism correlates with positive mood, immune changes, and stress management (Segerstrom et al, 1998). This view finds support in various studies and researches (Fredrickson, 2009). Some argue that positivity "worked best in helping human ancestors survive life-or-death situations" (Tooby & Cosmides, 1990). It is noteworthy that individuals require positive news, even fabricated ones, especially in a crisis.

Thus, participants' inclination to share positive news about Ukraine is rooted in their wish to disseminate positivity. This desire stems from the belief that positive information, even if fabricated, contributes to creating an optimistic atmosphere and fostering a positive state of mind, as noted during the study's focus groups and experiments.

The results differed in the second group: Five participants shared positive information about Ukraine, five of them - negative about Russia. The same trend can be observed in this case. The participants who 'shared positivity' received the same kind of positive feedback and conveyed happiness with their facial expressions and gestures. One of the participants expressed an interesting opinion that if they received positive feedback, including likes, they would share this type of information again.

Another key insight emerged from the participants' comments during the discussion: If social media users find out that the 'positive' information that they shared is false, it will lead to disappointment and potentially induce feelings of panic and stress. However, they state that refuting the negative false information is a kind of relief, as the negative news is no longer true.

Upon learning that all the provided information was false, participants remarked that if their primary objective was to boost social media activity and garner more subscribers, they would refrain from deleting the fake post. Instead, they would leverage the engagement metrics—likes, shares, and comments. However, a relevant caption would be added to increase comments.

Social media users need to be active and visibly informed on the platform (in this case *Facebook*), as their friends also use it. The reactions they receive from the said

online friends are very important. This has an obvious connection to the SDT, as it reveals the motives behind user activity and information sharing.

Focus group discussion also clarified that historical background significantly influences people's choices in selecting media sources or sharing information. As per the focus group analysis, it was revealed that sharing positive information during a crisis about Ukraine and the Ukrainian people is a priority for most of the participants.

Discussion and conclusion

By combining suitable methods and selected theories, all research questions were thoroughly answered. The chosen theory serves as a solid basis for answering each question. Content analysis proved instrumental in providing a crucial answer to the first question (RQ1: What types of manipulations were utilized on Georgian social media during the course of the war?). Interestingly, the manipulative mechanisms employed by Russian propaganda align with established patterns of recognized manipulative tactics. The propaganda machine mainly and intensively uses demonization, fear manipulation, anti-Western and, in this case, anti-Ukrainian propaganda and gaslighting principles. The latter is one of the most dangerous methods of psychological manipulation, wherein the abuser forces the victim to doubt their sanity and reality perception through consistent distortion and lies. Observation easily shows that today gaslighting as a psychological manipulation can be equated with disinformation flow or censorship.

The survey provided an opportunity to understand what types of manipulators are most influential among social media users (RQ2). As per respondents' answers, the majority of social media users (66.2%, n=199) report that the combination of the title and the photo captures their attention - emphasizing the logical connection between the two elements. Content analysis showed that the pseudo-positive false information is characterized by excessively long titles that encapsulate the main message. Also 23% (n=69) of the respondents state that only the title is attractive and intriguing to them. Intriguingly, that 65% (n=195) of respondents refrain from clicking the link, obtaining information solely through title reading. Hence, the primary and most impactful tool of manipulation are photo and title together.

It is essential to delve into the phenomenon of visual manipulation. As mentioned in the literature review, users tend to rely heavily on visual manipulations and place

greater trust in them, primarily due to the persuasive impact of visualization (Silverman, 2016). The capabilities of Photoshop and the advancements in artificial intelligence have elevated photo manipulation to unprecedented levels. Consequently, the influence of photo manipulations remains potent. However, research indicates that strategically separating the headline from the accompanying photo significantly diminishes the impact of fake news on social media users. This separation is crucial, as combining the headline and the photo into a unified manipulative entity amplifies their collective effect.

However, the main question (RQ3) revolves around the types of false information disseminated by Georgian social media users—whether it leans towards negative news about Russia and positive news about Ukraine or vice versa. All - the CrowdTangle application, polls and focus groups have shown that most users prefer pro-Ukrainian pseudo-positive information, which they actively share on social networks. Most of the respondents (71%, n=213) indicate that they do not want to spread any information about Russia. Here, another influential manipulator also emerges - the historical context, which guides the social media user on an emotional level. Consequently, during the crisis, users tend to share positive news about Ukraine. This inclination is related to both - relieving stress and maintaining an optimistic mood, aligning with our selected theories.

The user is guided by UGT and, thus, selects stories to satisfy the desire to defeat Russia, largely influenced by history, to navigate through crisis, and to infuse positivity [in this case, positive impulses for Georgians manifest through pro-Ukraine news]. In alignment with the principles of SDT, the user exhibits a distinct motivation, a reason why they behave this way. In our case, this motivation stems from the emotions evoked by the historical context, which forms the basis for choosing pro-Ukrainian news. This theory studies human motivation (Deci et al, 2012). By general observation, it resembles the UGT, however, it is more suited to the positioning of the user on social media. The latter is directly tied to RCT, as users make choices based on emotions, historical context and the existence of a common enemy, which is a rational choice within their perspective.

Herein lies the answer to the RQ4: Why do social media users share misinformation about the war? The primary motivator is navigating through the crisis and alleviating stress. For Georgian social media users, pro-Ukrainian news, even if fabricated, is more acceptable, as they consider it a common victory. The survey indicates a user's favorable

disposition towards the fabricated pro-Ukrainian narrative. Interestingly, when compared with the genuine pro-Russian story, the user tends to believe the fake Ukrainian story to be true. Hence, positive impulses at the subconscious level take precedence for social media users.

Finally, as an open question for discussion, it is possible to pose another inquiry: What impact does fake news have on social media users? There may be various answers to this question. Research, to a certain extent, suggests that faking in a specific positive way during a crisis can cultivate a positive and optimistic mood - an established method in positive psychology (Lambert et al., 2012; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020; Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2012). However, manipulative deceptions characteristic of Russian propaganda entail numerous negative consequences, warranting a separate study. Among the most significant is the creation of a disinformation vacuum, fostering misconceptions within society.

Therefore, based on the analysis of news, it is apparent that Russian propaganda in Georgia amid the Russo-Ukrainian War is potent, as 83% of the selected 106 widely circulated fake publications lean towards a pro-Russian stance. However, the survey indicates that Georgian social media users have a preference for positive information about Ukraine, influenced by the historical context. This preference is grounded in the emotional connection of most social media users who express support for Ukraine, sharing pro-Ukrainian information due to a shared sense of camaraderie and a perceived common enemy.

Appendix-1

• Experiment Details

Focus group participants were presented with fabricated news headlines and they were tasked with explaining their choices regarding which ones they would share and the reasoning behind their decisions.

Examples of fabricated news presented to the groups:

1. Pro-Russian: Russia tried to negotiate with Ukraine for months, but Zelensky threatened to raise hell;
2. Anti-Ukraine: Ukraine was orchestrating a genocide in Donbas for 8 years;
3. Anti-Russian: Russia gives up its positions.

Questions given to the participants after showing to them fabricated information:

Which information do you prefer?

Which post would you share?

Which post would you like?

On which post would you write a comment and what would you write?

Why did you write this particular comment?

In this case, do you prefer positive or negative information?

In this context, what is negative information for you?

In your opinion, which of the given posts is fake - which is true?

why do you think so?

Endnote

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