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UKRAINIAN MEMES DURING THE FULL-SCALE WAR: SOCIAL AND INFORMATIONAL ASPECTS

Ivan Mahuriak

*Ivan Franko National University of Lviv,
General Chuprynka street, 49, 79044, Lviv, Ukraine,
e-mail: magyriak@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9809-8610>*

Nataliia Voitovych

*Ivan Franko National University of Lviv,
General Chuprynka street, 49, 79044, Lviv, Ukraine,
e-mail: nataliya.voytovych@lnu.edu.ua
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9466-0787>*

The article analyzes the role of Ukrainian memes during the full-scale invasion of Russia. The focus is on their impact on shaping public opinion, maintaining morale, and combating disinformation. The study showed that memes have become a tool of information warfare and self-identification of Ukrainians, strengthening patriotic sentiments and countering hostile propaganda.

Keywords: Ukrainian memes, informational war, public opinion, meme culture, full-scale war, social media, internet memes.

Problem statement. A meme as a phenomenon has existed in the information space for years. During this time, millions of different memes were created and spread on the Internet. The most popular of them are called viral – memes that have become world-famous. In particular, public is creating more and more memes as a reaction to political processes taking place in a certain territory or around the world. The development of social media has caused an unprecedented development of memes, so they have the prospect of becoming a means of influence.

The beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2024 led to increased interest in Ukrainian culture both abroad and within the country. And since memes are a cultural unit, it did not escape them too.

The culture of memes in Ukraine is very unique in a way. For example, Ukraine is the first country in the world in which, because of the war, dozens, hundreds, and sometimes thousands of memes appear every day as a reaction to various news or certain aspects of the war itself.

Recent Research and Publications Analysis. Meme theory is a difficult subject to study because memes are a constantly changing phenomenon, which development depends on many factors. These include the development of social media, any changes in the information agenda, and even a change in public attitudes, under the influence of which memes acquire new forms or meanings. This is the main reason for the interest of scientists in various fields in this genre¹.

R. Dokins noted that the distribution of memes is constantly mutating and combining. And this is true, because the first popular memes in the Ukrainian Internet environment were most often in the form of images or certain videos that made people laugh. It could be parodies, excerpts from television programs, etc.

The concept of a meme gained particular popularity with the development of social media, where memes could be spread rapidly amongst other users. They first appeared in the Japanese and English-speaking segments of the Internet, and then, after gaining popularity, they also came to the Ukrainian one. Ukrainians both created memes for their local environment and were involved in creating global viral memes.

Mememes became more and more popular and as more platforms appeared on the Web, mememes always found their way in there. For example, the TikTok social media allows you to create mememes in different formats. The most popular ones are video and audio mememes, that is also strengthened by the fact that audio recordings created by one user can be used for videos of other users².

In addition to that, mememes moved to mass media and turned into a kind of way of informing and stimulating to analyze the situation. If the reader sees a meme with irony, for example, on some popular politician, then the question arises «what happened?» and this stimulates him to try to understand the situation. On the other hand – with the help of mememes, mass media precisely explain some nuances of processes or complex processes in general.

The methodological basis of the study. Analysis of content (mememes) in social media X, Telegram, Tik Tok, on news website «24 Channel».

Presentation of the main Research material. Mememes during the war became an exceptional phenomenon. Certainly, the first mememes in February and March 2022 were driven by a desire to make the enemy less scary. The fact remains that on the first day of the full-scale invasion, millions of people were horrified, but within days, mememes emerged of russian captives looking extremely bad – they looked no more than 18 years old in uniforms that were several sizes larger. There were also several meme phrases, that symbolized Ukrainian resistance in the first days of war:

- «russian warship, go f*** yourself», – phrase of the border guard, said to the crew of the cruiser «Moscow» during the assault on Zmiiny Island on February 24, 2022;
- «do you know, where you came to? This is Konotop, every other woman here is a witch...», – words of a Konotop local woman to russians that came to city in February 25, 2022.

¹ Deshpande, T., Mani, N. (2021), An interpretable approach to hateful meme detection. In: Proceedings of the 2021 International Conference on Multimodal Interaction, URL: <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3462244.3479949> (дата перегляду 15 січня 2025).

² NV.ua (2022), «В мене є подарок для тебе». У TikTok з'явився профіль, на якому колекціонують українські мемні звуки різних часів. URL: <https://nv.ua/ukr/lifestyle/u-tiktok-zbirayut-ukrajinski-memni-zvuki-video-50249142.html> (дата перегляду 15 січня 2025).

- «Oleg, what are you doing here, Oleg?», – fragment of interrogation of Russian invader by locals of Sumy, who defended city on their own and captured that soldier on the evening of February 24, 2022.
- «Put some sunflower seeds in your pocket so that they will sprout when you lie down here», – words of Henichesk local woman on February 25, 2022. The city was captured by russians in that time. Later it became known that the author of the words is Svitlana Pankova. The Russians pursued her, but in September 2024 she managed to leave the occupation;

These are just highlights. In addition, individual episodes, such as a video of a man carrying a mine with his bare hands, another carrying missile fragments, or a tractor pulling a tank away, also became memes, strengthened public sentiment and reduced the fear of an enemy that had the advantage in numbers of both weapons and soldiers.

Mememes about missile attacks deserve special attention. It would seem that this is definitely not a topic for jokes. However, in late February 2022, one of the users shared that in order not to use profanity during alarms, she says «bledina is flying»³. Instead of an curse word, the woman used the name of a baby food brand in the Czech Republic. Later Ukrainians started to use this word for russian missiles. Sometimes the name of Angela Merkel was used instead.

Meme culture in Ukraine is said to be an important part of our self-identification, because no other country in the world has an example of such a colossal number of local memes, which amaze with their diversity. Moreover, most memes appeared during wartime.

The reason why memes are so popular in times of war is that memes are not only a means of entertainment or information, but also a kind of tool of manipulation⁴. And this is also an important part of information confrontation and counter-propaganda. This is important in the context of combating disinformation, and the reader, viewer or listener should not only receive information, but also understand it. In this way, the audience can be protected from the influence of hostile narratives through mockery, sarcasm and irony.

Also, memes that lift the mood allow you to distract yourself at least for some time in the stressful conditions of war⁵.

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³ Шевченко, В. (2022), Що таке «бледіна»: від марки дитячого харчування до символу руснявої ракети. Начасі. URL: <https://nachasi.com/creative/2022/06/22/what-is-bledina/> (дата перегляду 14 січня 2025).

⁴ Fiadotava, A. and Chlopicki, W. (2022), Communicating humour in public during local, regional and global crises. Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland. URL: <https://tertium.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ICS5-abstracts.pdf#page=13> (дата перегляду 14 січня 2025).

⁵ Магуряк І. (2022), «Українські меми vs російська пропаганда Анастасія Зазуляк [інтерв'ю з головною редакторкою сайту «24 канал» про меми в матеріалах видання]». URL: <http://mediakrytyka.lnu.edu.ua/intervyu/ukrayinski-memy-vs-rosiyskoyi-propahandy-rozpovidaye-holovna-redaktorka-saytu-24-kanal-anastasiya-zazulyak.html> (дата перегляду 13 січня 2025).

⁶ Булах, М. (2019), «Аспектологія досліджень мемів». Науковий вісник Міжнародного гуманітарного університету. Сер.: Філологія, 39 (3), С. 104-107. URL: http://www.vestnikphilology.mgu.od.ua/archive/v39/part_3/25.pdf (дата перегляду 14 січня 2025).

There is no reason to believe that memes can replace informational and analytical texts, but with their help, especially in wartime, you can awaken interest in understanding the situation and further interest in it with a deeper study of a specific issue.

Sometimes memes get out of control on social media. In the fall of 2023, Mykhailo Lebiga, a popular blogger from Chernivtsi, streamed on the Twitch platform. At that time, he was already a well-known volunteer – he watched various Ukrainian shows or other content on his streams and commented them, and for this subscribers gave donations for the needs of our defenders. Lebiga once emotionally commented on the debate between the candidates for President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich in 2004, in particular, he drew attention to how often the surname of the candidate from the «Party of Regions» was pronounced incorrectly. In the comments, they started jokingly calling him Lebigovich, which later turned into a viral meme about the next President of Ukraine – Mykhailo Lebigovich. At first, the blogger reacted very aggressively to this, which made the meme even more popular⁷. Later, however, Lebiga together with the «Come back Alive» foundation decided to use the meme. They decided to hold «elections» in a number of cities of Ukraine. Implementation was simple – people came to places where they could «vote» for Lebigovich with a donation of at least 100 hryvnias. In this way, it was possible to collect more than 20 million hryvnias for the needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on the «voting» day. In this way, the blogger set a record for the largest donation gathering, the cause of which was an Internet meme.

Another vivid example of the influence of an Internet meme is the story of the traitor singer Ani Lorak. In the spring of 2023, volunteer and blogger Serhiy Sternenko subscribed to the singer on social networks and left her comments thanking her for donating to the Armed Forces. The trend was picked up by others, who began to call Ani Lorak a «heroine of our time» who «conducts subversive activities behind enemy lines». The comments of Sternenko and other commentators were a response to the singer's interview with Russian propagandists, in which she could not even utter the word «war» and tried to prove that she is out of politics⁸.

The culmination of Ani Lorak's «volunteer activities» was the creation of the «Ani Lorak's Revenge Fund» in Ukraine by activists. One of the drones with the appropriate marking attacked Moscow on May 30, 2023. The photo of the drone wreckage marked «Ani Lorak's Revenge Fund» became so resonant that her concerts were canceled throughout Russia. She had to once again go to give interviews and justify herself to the russians and prove that she was not helping the Armed Forces of Ukraine in any way. This way, the meme helped to spoil the life of the traitor of Ukraine.

In July 2023, then British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told reporters at a NATO summit: «There is a small caveat here, which is that whether we like it or not, people want to see gratitude. My advice to Ukrainians: sometimes you convince countries to give up their own stockpiles [of weapons], and yes, it is a noble war, and we see that you are fighting not

⁷ WeUkraine (2023), Хто такий Михайло Лебігович: як простий блогер став народним мемом і «кандидатом у президенти України». URL: <https://weukraine.tv/top/hto-takyj-myhajlo-lebigovich-yak-prostyj-blogger-stav-narodnym-memom-i-kandydatom-u-prezydenty-ukrayiny/> (дата перегляду 17 січ. 2025).

⁸ Романюк, А., (2023), «Фонд помсти Ані Лорак»: мережу «розірвало» меми від наліпок на дронах, які атакували Москву. URL: https://24tv.ua/moskvu-atakuvali-droni-ani-lorak-reaktsiya-sotsmerezh_n2323913 (дата перегляду 17 січня 2025).

only for yourself, but also for our freedoms. But sometimes you have to convince lawmakers in the US Congress, you have to convince politicians in other countries who doubt that you know it's worth it, that it's worth it, and that they're going to get something for it...»⁹

These words caused such a flurry of memes from Ukrainians that they flooded not only the Ukrainian, but also the British segment of the Internet. Memes about thanking God and Ben Wallace for everything became so popular that the minister himself had to explain his words, and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had to apologize for what the official said.

Despite everything, during a full-scale war, a meme can be accurately characterized as a means of expressing public opinion. The creators of memes themselves often talk about this, explaining appearance of memes with the well-known lines from Lesya Ukrainka's poem: «In order not to cry, I laughed».

It is difficult to list the entire range of topics on which Ukrainians made memes during the full-scale war, but some are worth highlighting, as they illustrate the manifestation of public opinion.

On August 9, 2022, the Defense Forces struck a russian military target in occupied Crimea for the first time. The blow itself and the russians' reaction to it in the form of panic caused a lot of memes. In particular, the video in which a russian woman cries and complains that she does not want to eat from Crimea and Alushta because «it's so homely here» became almost the biggest reason for jokes. Memes about the liberation of Crimea and the russians running away demonstrated at that time the readiness of Ukrainians to work for a common goal – the liberation of the entire territory of Ukraine within its legally recognized borders¹⁰.

In June 2022, on the occasion of his birthday, volunteer Serhii Prytula announced a large gathering for the purchase of three Bayraktar drones, manufactured in Turkey. According to the plan, it was necessary to collect money for one UAV, but the Ukrainians exceeded the plan and collected for three at once. The Turkish partners were impressed by the actions of the Ukrainians, so they decided to give three drones to our military for free. Therefore, in August, Serhiy Prytula announced that the ICEYE satellite was purchased with the collected funds. The number of memes about the purchase of a satellite was amazing – people joked that the next gathering would be for nuclear weapons¹¹. At that time, memes demonstrated that Ukrainians are ready to support the Defense Forces and do everything to ensure their needs.

On October 10, 2022, russians launched their first massive attack on Ukraine's energy infrastructure and continued to attack over the following months, causing emergency or planned blackouts across the country. However, this also gave rise to many memes about

⁹ Defence-ua (2023), Хто кому не Amazon: про що дійсно попередив Бен Уоллес, забувши історію власної країни. URL: https://defence-ua.com/people_and_company/ne_amazon-12196.html (дата перегляду 14 січня 2025).

¹⁰ Вороніна, А. (2022), «Вообще не хачу уезжать – Не уїдеш»: мережа вибухнула мемами на руйнування Кримського мосту. URL: <https://glavred.net/ukraine/voobshche-ne-hochu-uezzhat-ne-uedesh-set-vzorvalas-memami-na-razrushenie-krymskogo-mosta-10415519.html> (дата перегляду 15 січня 2025).

¹¹ Українська правда (2022), «Наступні – атомна бомба і авіаносець»: реакція українців на купівлю «народного» супутника. URL: <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2022/08/18/250067/> (дата перегляду 14 січня 2025).

the fact that we can see who the russians are even without light, about how people learned to do all the work in a few hours, as long as there is light on the schedule, etc. These jokes demonstrated that Ukrainians are ready to endure such inconveniences and have no intention of giving up¹². The slogan of these memes was mainly the words of Volodymyr Zelensky, which he said to the russians after one of the first attacks: «Without light or without you? Without you!»

The russians repeatedly raised the topic of nuclear weapons during the full-scale war, hinting at their readiness to use them in the war against Ukraine. The greatest fear was in the fall of 2022, as the Defense Forces launched a counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast, Donetsk Oblast, Luhansk Oblast, and Kherson Oblast. However, while the whole world was afraid, one of the netizens reported that she discovered that her friend had a chat with people who decided to gather on the Shchekavitsa mountain in Kyiv for an orgy in the event of a nuclear attack. This post literally broke the network, so then everything was full of memes about Shchekavytsa, and periodically this meme becomes relevant during new threats from the Russians¹³. This meme demonstrates that Ukrainians are not afraid of nuclear weapons, which is confirmed by a survey by the sociological group «Rating» for the Gallup International research institute, published in April 2023 – citizens of Ukraine and Armenia showed the least fear of the threat of using nuclear weapons, while Ukraine is in the greatest risk zone, fighting against a nuclear country¹⁴.

In the context of a full-scale russian invasion, memes have become an important tool to counter russian propaganda by ridiculing fakes and using irony on russian authorities statements. The Chief editor of the «24 Channel» website A. Zazulyak notes that the success of memes in the fight against propaganda is emotions¹⁵. «Everything that has an emotion spreads rapidly. Memes have exactly that emotion. Media, movies, music always play on two emotions – either great sadness, tragedy or something very funny. These are the two emotions that are very touching. A meme is a form of one of them, so it is a great tool in the fight against propaganda. Debunking fakes with the help of memes is a whole art».

In addition, memes actually became a weapon in the information war with russia¹⁶. An example of the effective use of memes in the media is the «24 Channel» website and their social networks. Memes are very popular in the content of the website, especially in times of full-scale war because of its role in information warfare. In addition, thanks to memes, it is possible to explain different processes in a simplified manner, which is important at

¹² 24 Канал, «Нічого не ясно»: соцмережі вибухнули мемами через графіки відключення світла. URL: https://24tv.ua/vidklyuchennya-svitla-ukrayini-yak-sotsmerezhi-reaguyut-memami_n2187390 (дата перегляду 15 січня 2025).

¹³ BBC (2022), «Щекавиця. Гора, на якій готується оргія «в момент ядерного удару». URL: <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-63061624> (дата перегляду 15 січня 2025).

¹⁴ Рейтинг (2024), Ядерна загроза: дослідження «Рейтингу» з Gallup International. URL: <https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/yaderna-zagroza-doslidzhennya-rejtingu-z-gallup-international.html> (дата перегляду 16 січня 2025).

¹⁵ Магуряк, І. (2022), «Українські меми vs російська пропаганда Анастасія Зазуляк [інтерв'ю з головною редакторкою сайту «24 канал» про меми в матеріалах видання]». URL: <http://mediakrytyka.lnu.edu.ua/intervyu/ukrayinski-memy-vs-rosiyskoyi-propahandy-rozpovidaye-holovna-redaktorka-saytu-24-kanal-anastasiya-zazulyak.html> (дата перегляду 13 січня 2025).

¹⁶ Fiadotava, A. and Chlopicki, W. (2022), Communicating humour in public during local, regional and global crises. Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland. URL: <https://tertium.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ICS5-abstracts.pdf#page=13> (дата перегляду 14 січня 2025).

the time of information confrontation, because the information space is oversaturated and often readers cannot understand the intricacies of all the processes that take place.

On the «24 Channel» website, there is a thematic tag «Memes», by which you can find relevant publications, which are mostly an overview of the people's reaction to certain processes. Before the full-scale invasion, memes were mostly a weekly column that ran every Sunday called «the best memes of the week». Exceptions were exceptional events that caused the creation of numerous memes, such as First Lady Olena Zelenska's misspeaking that she buys mackerel at the price of 8 hryvnias per kilogram, or Kyiv Mayor Vitaliy Klitschko's, who congratulated citizens with the new 2222 year.

The first meme during the full-scale invasion published on the website was the Central Committee's reaction to the attempts of the occupiers to hold a so-called «referendum» in the Kherson region, in which it was clearly hinted that the invaders should go to a psychiatrist with their plans. One of the first memes in media's social networks was the image of a mark on the face of the Russian president, which was added to the news that citizens could face up to 15 years in prison for marking.

However, the first review of memes during the invasion was a collection of memes about the explosions in Belgorod, Russia, which were heard there for the first time and caused panic among Russians, which was used by Ukrainian social media users who spread misinformation in order to increase panic among the local population. In addition, Russians were ironically offered to leave for Kharkiv, which was suffering from constant bombardment. These events were also ridiculed in social media.

There are no specific instructions for creating memes. As noted by the Chief editor of the «24 Channel» website, A. Zazulyak, memes appear in the same way as poems from poets or songs from musicians. So ideas of SMM specialists are the core to what readers see in social media. Since this is a team work, SMM specialists can consult with each other about certain memes created by them¹⁷.

Usually, SMM specialists do not have much time to create memes, which is explained by the speed of information flow. Therefore, they often use template images to create pictures – they can be familiar frames from movies or cartoons or generally known photos on which captions are changed depending on the situation.

The simplest method of meme creation is usage of certain words or phrases that have already become established in society as a meme, or deriving something from them. For example, if at first the media ridiculed the statements of the Ministry of Defense of Russia about the preserved buoyancy of the cruiser «Moskva», although it had already sunk, then the social networks of «24 Channel» began to use the phrase «negative buoyancy» as an irony from Russian statements. After that such phrases as «negative attack», «negative birth rate» and so on were created.

One more tool for creating memes that is also on of the easiest to use is a context meme. This is when an image is added to the text without any actual links, but it's still laughable. For example, on March 12, 2022, a message appeared in Telegram that Belarus had announced the dispatch of 5 battalion-tactical groups to the border with Ukraine. An

¹⁷ Магуряк, І. (2022), «Українські меми vs російська пропаганда Анастасія Зазуляк [інтерв'ю з головною редакторкою сайту «24 канал» про меми в матеріалах видання]». URL: <http://mediakrytyka.lnu.edu.ua/intervyu/ukrayinski-memy-vs-rosiyskoyi-propahandy-rozpovidaye-holovna-redaktorka-saytu-24-kanal-anastasiya-zazulyak.html> (дата перегляду 13 січня 2025).

image of a photo of mashed potatoes was attached to the post. The reason for this is the stereotype about the excessive love of Belarusians for potatoes and dishes made from them. So comparing battalions to mashed potatoes showed that Ukrainians are ready to fend off and mash any invaders, and potatoes were a link to nationality of said invaders.

Also, the media actively uses memes in two additional ways: as means of informing – memes that actually carry information and as a way to strengthen the effects of messages.

It is worth noting the creation of memes on the site, especially in the context of war. News writers use them to ridicule the statements of Russian figures and describe the defeats of the occupiers. The words of the so-called «new language» are also very popular. Another element of such memes in news texts was «Bavovnyatko» – a meme from the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, which was created to ridicule the occupants because of the fact that explosions in the temporarily occupied territories became more frequent, and the Russians continued to call them «claps». The link here is that in russian «claps» can also mean «cotton» and the latter in Ukrainian is translated as «bavovna».

Authors often use not only the word «Bavovnyatko», omitting the word «explosion», but also ironically speak about «the visit of a mythical creature», and use images.

The use of such elements in informational texts can be interpreted as a violation of journalism standards. However, in times of war, each media independently determines its approach to news, especially those concerning the enemy.

But these same elements are an important component of countering russian propaganda and disinformation, because russia launches fakes not only through propaganda resources, but also through bots or its agents in foreign countries. Therefore, the elements of ridiculing the statements of the occupants or their versions of events are important for the reader's information security, because such an approach adds an analytical element to the informational text.

Conclusion. In Ukraine, the importance of memes is growing – many leaders of public opinion create whole materials dedicated to memes in the Ukrainian information space, calling them a separate layer of culture. The sources of memes in Ukraine are different – television shows, random recordings or statements of individual people. Also, memes arise as a reaction to certain phenomena and processes, which, on the example of Ukraine, was especially manifested during a full-scale war.

However, the important question is about finding the line in how much the enemy should be mocked, because mocking the enemy's army can lead to the devaluation of both the forces of the invaders and the strength of the Ukrainian army. This is repeatedly emphasized by representatives of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations. The reason for this is that by devaluing the enemy, people can stop really evaluating the achievements of the Ukrainian army. So news authors face not only the task of using a meme to make the text more interesting and one that affects the information security of the reader, but also to understand the limits of jokes, their expediency and, in general, to realize what narratives the text carries.

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УКРАЇНСЬКІ МЕМИ В УМОВАХ ПОВНОМАСШТАБНОЇ ВІЙНИ: СУСПІЛЬНИЙ ТА ІНФОРМАЦІЙНИЙ АСПЕКТИ

Іван Магуряк

Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка,

вул. Генерала Чупринки, 49, 79044, Львів, Україна

e-mail: magyriak@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9809-8610>

Наталія Войтович

Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка,

вул. Генерала Чупринки, 49, 79044, Львів, Україна

e-mail: nataliya.voytovych@lnu.edu.ua

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9466-0787>

Стаття присвячена аналізу феномену українських мемів в умовах повномасштабного російського вторгнення. Мемі як частина інформаційного простору відіграють важливу роль у формуванні суспільної думки, підтриманні морального духу та протидії ворожій пропаганді. Основною метою дослідження є визначення впливу мемів на інформаційне протистояння, дослідження їхньої ролі у самоідентифікації українців та способів використання мемів для інформування та розваги.

У дослідженні застосовано метод контент-аналізу, який дав змогу проаналізувати мемі, поширені у соціальних мережах (Telegram, TikTok, X) та на інформаційних платформах («24 Канал»). Проаналізовано найпопулярніші мемі, які виникли у перші місяці війни, та їхній подальший вплив на інформаційний простір. Зокрема, увагу приділено висловам, які стали символами спротиву.

Основні результати дослідження демонструють, що мемі не лише підвищують обізнаність населення про події війни, а й сприяють емоційній підтримці та зміцненню патріотичних настроїв. Вони також стали інструментом боротьби з дезінформацією через висміювання ворожих наративів та іронію над пропагандою.

Значущість дослідження полягає у висвітленні унікальної ролі мемів як частини української культури і зброї інформаційної війни. Отримані результати можуть бути корисними для подальших наукових досліджень у галузі соціальних комунікацій, а також для розробки стратегій інформаційної безпеки. Стаття підкреслює важливість мемів у часи кризи як інструменту, що допомагає суспільству адаптуватися, протидіяти ворожим впливам і зберігати стійкість.

Ключові слова: українські мемі, інформаційна війна, суспільна думка, культура мемів, повномасштабна війна, соціальні мережі, інтернет-мемі.