

Інтернет-меми як захисна комунікаційна стратегія в умовах підвищеної загрози: якісне дослідження серед українських студентів-медійників

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КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА	АНОТАЦІЯ
захисна комунікаційна стратегія інтернет-меми медіастійкість «розрив у декодуванні іронії» цифровий фольклор цифрове розчарування медіаграмотність якісне дослідження	Широкомасштабна російська війна проти України серйозно порушила традиційні форми споживання медіа, змусивши молодь орієнтуватися в децентралізованих інформаційних середовищах, що характеризуються високим рівнем загрози. У цьому контексті інтернет-меми стали не просто розвагою, а життєво важливими комунікативними одиницями. Хоча ці візуальні артефакти цифрового фольклору виконують функцію важливих захисних механізмів для загрожених аудиторій, закладений у них гумор створює значні виклики для міжкультурної комунікації. Це тривале якісне дослідження аналізує еволюцію медіапрактик українських студентів-медійників крізь призму «захисної комунікаційної стратегії» (DCS). Простежуючи траєкторію від початкової міжкультурної артикуляції досвіду у 2023 році до поглибленого усвідомлення алгоритмів, яке спостерігалось у фокус-групах 2024–2025 років, дослідження пояснює унікальний адаптивний досвід. Методологія передбачає двоступеневий дизайн: міжкультурний онлайн-семинар 2023 року для встановлення базового рівня зовнішньої артикуляції, за яким слідують поглиблені онлайн-фокус-групи. Дискурсивний аналіз анонімізованих транскриптів виявляє глибокі зміни в медіастійкості. Українська молодь активно використовує оборонну комунікаційну стратегію, зводячи «когнітивні фаєрволи», практикуючи «афективну гігієну» та майстерно застосовуючи «цифрові шиболети» для коректної інтерпретації інтернет-мемів. Дослідження виявляє системну вразливість на перетині стійкості локальних громад та алгоритмічного кураторства: «розрив у декодуванні іронії» (Irony Gap). Коли захисні інтернет-меми з глибоким контекстом потрапляють до західної аудиторії, їх можуть витлумачити неправильно. Не маючи спільного вернакуляру, зовнішня аудиторія ризикує розшифровувати жарти буквально, мимоволі підтверджуючи ворожі наративи та сприяючи цифровому обскурантизму. Зрештою, дослідження доходить висновку, що для подолання «розриву» необхідні глобальні рамки медіаграмотності, які виходять за межі базової перевірки фактів і охоплюють контекстуальне розшифрування візуальних вернакулярів.

1. Introduction

Problem statement. The large-scale Russian war against Ukraine has severely disrupted the traditional social contract between institutional media and their audiences, highlighting the critical necessity for robust societal resilience against information disorders. In this high-stress context, young adults' media consumption habits have undergone rapid change. Previously, researchers warned that the fundamental danger of

engaging with audiovisual content lies in its capacity to seamlessly foster audience loyalty to specific, often manipulative, interpretations of complex geopolitical topics (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). As hostilities escalated, these visual artefacts transformed into highly influential communicative units. They now play a dual role: acting as a vital psychological coping mechanism and a tool for resilience for audiences living under constant threat (Starkova & Yehorova, 2022), whilst simultaneously serving as a potent instrument for disseminating information and countering hostile

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narratives. Because these visual artefacts are inherently humorous and often perceived as non-threatening, they pose a significant challenge to conventional media literacy models. When audiences engage with serious, war-related information through the prism of irony, there is an inherent risk of trivialising severe geopolitical events, which can inadvertently foster Digital Obscurantism and political detachment among audiences outside the immediate crisis zone.

Analysis of recent research and publications.

Recent scholarly discourse emphasises that countering modern information disorders requires a multi-level approach to resilience, extending beyond purely state-led interventions to include community-driven adaptation (Iarovyi et al., 2025). In these digital spaces, social media platforms effectively blur the lines between private vernacular expression and political discourse (Highfield, 2016). Within these decentralised frameworks, visual digital artefacts, particularly internet memes, function as crucial cultural touchstones. Previous research has firmly established that internet memes function as modern digital folklore, reflecting vernacular expressions unique to specific communities (Blank, 2009; Milner, 2016). However, translating this folklore across cultural borders creates significant friction. To conceptualise this challenge, the present study introduces the term *Digital Shibboleths* — rigid visual and textual markers that serve as identifiers in high-threat environments. For these shibboleths to be properly decoded, an audience must possess a *Vernacular Interpretive Framework*: a shared set of cultural, linguistic, and experiential codes deeply rooted in local trauma and collective history.

Crucially, this framework serves as the community's "common sense," providing the essential context that outsiders lack and ultimately leading to misinterpretation of defensive irony. Drawing on the theories of encoding/decoding (Hall, 1973), it becomes evident that insider communities successfully comprehend the trauma-shielding humour embedded in these internet memes. In contrast, outsiders — lacking the necessary cultural baseline — often perceive this grassroots resilience as a genuine, non-ironic message.

Consequently, the theoretical lens of this study proposes a conceptual duality in audience reception: the *Defensive Communication Strategy (DCS)* versus *Digital Disenchantment (DD)*. DCS represents an active survival practice in which audiences construct Cognitive Firewalls and practice Affective Hygiene (Papacharissi, 2016). Within this strategy, humour serves as an affective filter to sustain societal vigilance. Ultimately, DCS is an exercise in epistemic agency — an active pushback against the epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) of macro-level algorithms and external audiences that lack the capacity to decode vernacular trauma properly.

Conversely, DD is a passive vulnerability typical of stable, low-threat environments, where audiences use irony to detach from global crises, ultimately risking Digital Obscurantism.

The purpose of this longitudinal study is to analyse the evolving media practices of Ukrainian students through the theoretical lens of the DCS. In this context, the students' engagement with internet memes is examined not merely as entertainment, but as a form of active digital resistance. Furthermore, by tracing the trajectory from their initial cross-cultural articulations in 2023 to deepening algorithmic awareness in 2024–2025, the research explores how these students define the boundaries of their resilience as their local digital folklore collides with external, Western audiences.

Methodology. This study employs a qualitative research design combining a two-stage longitudinal analysis of a high-threat environment with a low-threat comparative anchor.

- **Stage 1 (2023 Baseline).** The primary baseline was established through a joint online meeting as a part of a block-seminar titled "News Agenda: History and Ukrainian Context," held in December 2023. This meeting brought together students from Paderborn University in Germany and the Department of Social Communication Management (now the Department of Business Journalism and Digital Media) at Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics in Kharkiv, Ukraine. The meeting served as a unique cross-cultural environment where Ukrainian participants actively answered questions about their media consumption, strategies for dealing with disinformation, and perceptions of national narratives.
- **Stage 2 (2024–2025 Evolution).** A secondary stage was conducted as part of the broader research project "Internet Memes in the Context of the War in Ukraine," implemented under a Safe Haven fellowship at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), Netherlands, and Scholars at Risk from Ukrainian Universities (SARU) fellowship at Aarhus University, Denmark. It comprises a series of in-depth online focus groups involving Ukrainian university students majoring in media and audiovisual arts. The participants actively analysed specific crisis internet memes and synthetic video content, rationalising their emotional responses and wartime media habits.
- **Comparative control anchor (low-threat context).** To establish a baseline for Digital Disenchantment and validate the Irony Gap conceptually, in January 2025 a pilot in-depth

interview was conducted with a university student in the Netherlands (representing a stable, low-threat European democracy). This anchor provided crucial comparative data on how external audiences decode Digital Shibboleths.

Sampling and data collection. The study employed a purposive convenience sampling method. The participants were recruited voluntarily among undergraduate students majoring in journalism, digital media, and audiovisual arts. This target group was selected because media students possess a higher baseline of media literacy and actively reflect on their media consumption habits.

Stage 1 (2023) involved approximately 20 participants from Ukrainian and German universities who volunteered for the cross-cultural online block seminar.

Stage 2 (2024–2025) included exactly 19 Ukrainian media students across three in-depth online focus groups, representing distinct regional and institutional contexts: Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics (KhNUE, $n=8$), Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts (KhSADA, $n=3$), and Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (KNU, $n=8$). Additionally, a purposive pilot interview was conducted in the Netherlands to serve as a low-threat comparative baseline.

Due to the high-threat environment and constant power outages in Ukraine, the exact number of participants fluctuated, which is a natural limitation of wartime qualitative field research. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, data collection aimed at thematic saturation. Data was collected via secure video conferencing platforms. All sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' verbal consent, subsequently transcribed, and completely anonymised to ensure safety and ethical compliance.

It is crucial to address potential concerns regarding over-generalisation. The cross-cultural comparative baseline was fundamentally established during the 2023 Stage 1 seminar, where German students specifically prepared and posed targeted questions on media consumption and disinformation (including inquiries into the portrayal of Ukrainian culture and the use of humour in media). It was precisely through this structured, peer-to-peer inquiry that the topic of wartime internet memes organically emerged as a cultural phenomenon. Consequently, the single pilot interview conducted with a Dutch student was not used to generalise the primary empirical findings. Instead, it served strictly as a supplementary comparative anchor to conceptually validate the Digital Disenchantment baseline and observe the external reception of the Irony Gap mechanism. The core empirical conclusions

regarding defensive strategies are drawn exclusively from the Ukrainian cohort.

Research instruments and procedures. To avoid mere descriptiveness and ground the research in concrete empirical data, both research stages were structured around specific thematic questions and visual stimuli.

During Stage 1 (2023), the cross-cultural baseline was established using a semi-structured questionnaire developed by the German students. The inquiry focused on core areas of media resilience, specifically asking Ukrainian participants: (1) "Have you come across disinformation in the media, and how do you deal with it?" and (2) "How does the media portray Ukrainian culture, and has this portrayal changed during the war?" In response to these targeted cultural questions, Ukrainian students organically introduced wartime internet memes as their primary cultural artefacts.

Building on this, Stage 2 (2024–2025) focus groups were explicitly structured around visual stimuli (see Figure 2 for examples). Specifically, the stimuli included static images from databases such as Know Your Meme (e.g., viral images) and dynamic video content from YouTube. Participants were asked directly to verbalise their cognitive and emotional responses: (1) how they decode the embedded humour, (2) whether they use such content for psychological relief (coping), and (3) how they perceive the risks of this content being misunderstood by external audiences. This stimulus-based approach allowed researchers to capture actual meaning-making processes rather than abstract opinions.

Methodological justification. Data was collected through anonymised transcripts of all sessions and analysed using discourse analysis. Integrating these distinct qualitative datasets enables a comprehensive analysis of the DCS and the emergence of epistemic agency, in which students transition from passive consumers to active defenders of local meaning. The 2023 cross-cultural seminar provided crucial macro-level data on *external articulation* — how Ukrainian youth attempt to explain their survival media practices to audiences lacking a shared contextual trauma. Building upon these initial observations of cross-cultural friction, the 2024–2025 focus groups served as a micro-level, insider environment, highlighting practices of Situated Cognition (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020) and Affective Hygiene. Finally, the inclusion of the Western pilot interview enabled a direct analytical contrast, operationalising the Irony Gap and DD as observable phenomena rather than abstract concepts. This sequential, complementary design enabled the researchers to move beyond merely identifying the cross-cultural gap, allowing for an in-depth internal analysis of the specific digital artefacts (internet

Table 1. Evolution of the Defensive Communication Strategy (2023 vs 2024–2025)

Indicator	Stage 1: 2023 Baseline (external articulation)	Stage 2: 2024–2025 (psychological preservation)
Primary media practice	Active fact-checking and debunking disinformation.	Construction of Cognitive Firewalls; proactive Affective Hygiene.
Function of internet memes	External articulation of wartime culture; explaining the context to outsiders.	Internal Affective Filtering: a cognitive coping mechanism to prevent exhaustion.
Attitude towards news feeds	Hyper-awareness and continuous monitoring of diverse platforms.	Strict curation; retreating to trusted, local Telegram channels.
Algorithmic awareness	Focus on human-driven disinformation (trolls, bots).	Sophisticated recognition of Algorithmic Obscurantism and Context Collapse (e.g., AI-generated parodies).

memes) and psychological mechanisms driving this disconnect.

2. Results

The qualitative data, collected across the two distinct methodological phases, reveal a profound evolution in how Ukrainian youth navigate and process high-threat information environments.

Media consumption changes. The initial 2023 baseline data captured Ukrainian students attempting to explain their rapidly shifting media practices to their European peers during the joint online meeting at Paderborn University. The structured dialogue prompted participants to reflect on the differences between Ukrainian and foreign media landscapes, specifically regarding how national and strategic narratives are shaped.

During these cross-cultural discussions, Ukrainian participants articulated a heavy reliance on participatory, decentralised networks for immediate survival information, actively rejecting the passive consumption encouraged by traditional institutional media. When asked how they deal with disinformation, the Ukrainian students demonstrated a hyper-aware, proactive approach. They identified Telegram channels as a primary battleground for war-related disinformation, while simultaneously noting that Ukrainian media experts actively disseminate strategies to defend against these manipulations, turning fact-checking into an integrated daily survival skill for young adults.

By 2024 and 2025, the focus group data demonstrates that this active hyper-awareness had evolved into a highly disciplined practice of psychological preservation. To mitigate severe emotional exhaustion, participants actively curated their media consumption, consciously retreating into

protective digital environments. One participant explicitly articulated this approach: “I have chosen the strategy of an information bubble and try not to read all this.... it is painful to live and observe this.”

The students reported deliberately limiting their exposure to algorithmically driven mainstream news, opting instead for community-curated, local Telegram channels to acquire necessary security updates without the accompanying emotional fatigue. As another student explained, “the psyche is exhausted and cannot be in a state of constant stress.” The stark necessity of this self-preservation was highlighted by a participant who noted that those who might judge their limited news consumption “will not pay for my psychiatrist when I need one.” The qualitative shift in students’ media habits is summarised in Table 1.

Decoding visual stimuli and humour. A highly illustrative example of how Ukrainian youth articulate their modern culture emerged during a 2023 discussion of internet-famous “war pets”. This discussion naturally evolved from the seminar’s focus on the functions of political humour and national narratives. When asked to define contemporary cultural symbols, participants immediately highlighted memeified animals, specifically pointing to Patron (a real-life mine-detecting dog), the military-associated Syrskyi the Cat, and the popular Stepan the Cat (see Figure 1 for examples).

The students explicitly framed these animals not merely as pets, but as integral components of modern popular culture. They utilise outwardly benign, humorous, and universally accessible symbols — such as a dog that appears on international postage stamps or a cat associated with the military — to process and communicate the severe realities of the invasion. Such visual symbols serve as critical elements of the digital memory of the war, as documented in recent archival initiatives (Rakityanskaya, 2023). Furthermore, this dialogue exposed cross-cultural friction: while

European students approached “culture” as a traditional subject of leisure or religion, Ukrainian students processed the same concept through the lens of existential threat, revealing a semantic gap between the two cohorts.

The most recent 2024–2025 data reveal an acute, sophisticated awareness among Ukrainian students regarding the weaponisation of digital folklore and the severe risks of cross-cultural algorithmic distribution. When presented with synthetic memetic content — such as an AI-generated deepfake (Bak Herrie et al., 2024) featuring SpongeBob SquarePants and the Ukrainian President requesting “five million rockets” — participants readily identified the artefact as an absurd parody designed to mock hostile propaganda. For the insider community, the humour was obvious and served as an affective trauma-shield: “This is the

funniest one overall... this deepfake about five million bombs is very funny.”

However, the students explicitly recognised the inherent danger of this content when removed from its native context. Participants expressed significant concern that audiences in stable Western democracies might decode this defensive irony literally. One participant highlighted this systemic vulnerability, observing: “If someone not from Ukraine sees them... what will they think? That this is the truth.” Another student expanded on this algorithmic danger, noting: “a person from America who sees this for the first time... might think Zelensky is actually a cannibal who really bombs children in Donbas.” The participant astutely concluded that “these are absolutely unhelpful thoughts for supporting Ukraine in those countries.” Furthermore, participants noted that

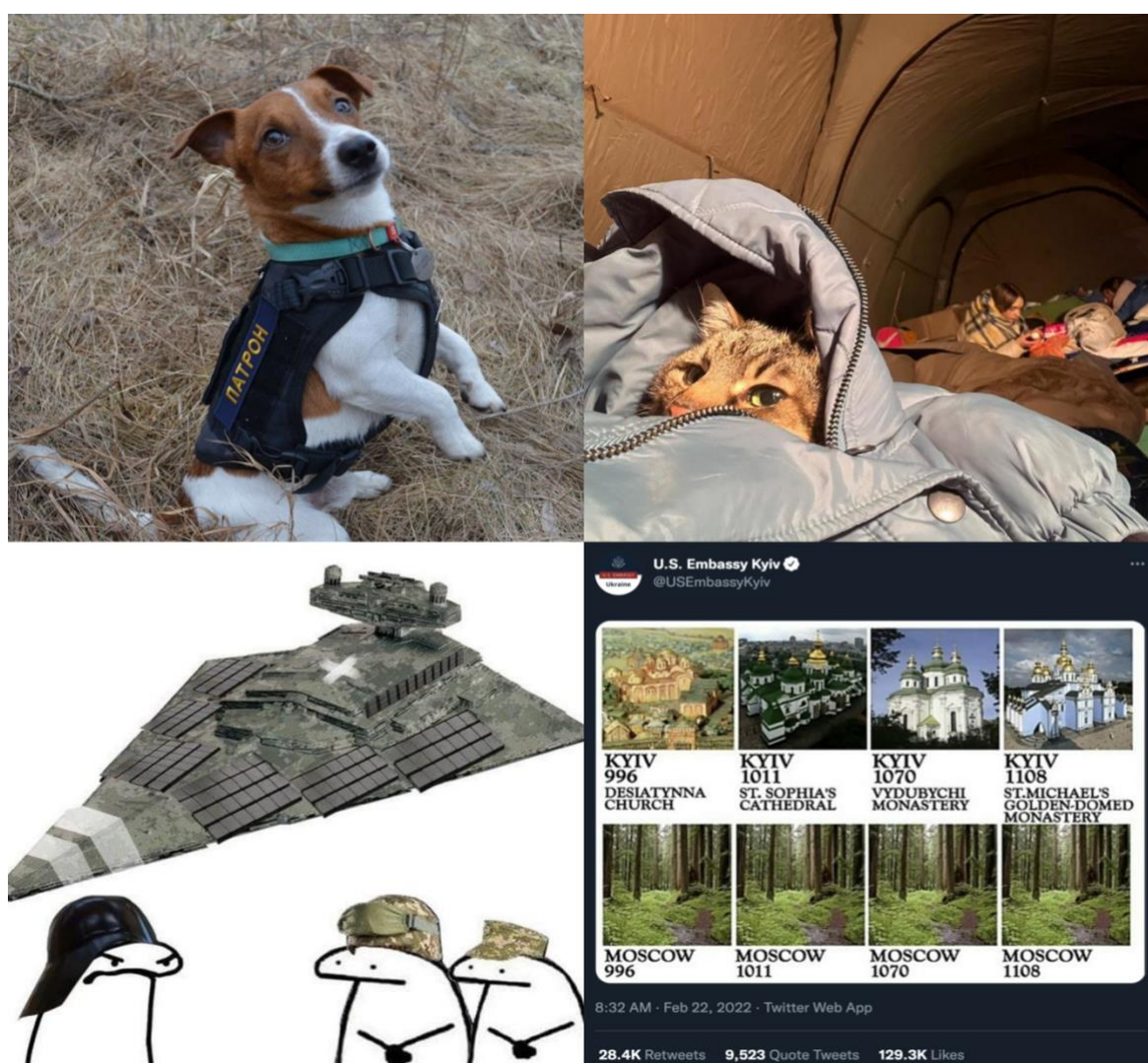


Figure 1. Examples of visual stimuli (wartime internet memes) discussed with Ukrainian students

Note. The selection illustrates diverse forms of digital folklore, ranging from memeified animals used for emotional coping to historical and geopolitical satire. (Sources: Images retrieved from the Know Your Meme database; the bottom-right image was originally published by the U.S. Embassy Kyiv).



Figure 2. The structural mechanism of cross-cultural misinterpretation: from Defensive Communication Strategy to the Irony Gap

outwardly humorous or neutral formats, such as cartoons, serve as insidious vectors for propaganda, implanting hostile narratives in younger Western generations who cannot yet fully analyse geopolitical reality.

3. Discussion

The empirical findings demonstrate a profound evolution in how audiences process and mitigate information warfare in sustained high-threat environments (Mozolevska, 2024; Boichak, 2022). Building upon the preliminary results of the initial phase of this research (Ivanova et al., 2022), which positioned institutional media education and professional fact-checking organisations as the primary means of counteracting information disorders (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), the current qualitative data gathered across the two stages illustrate a radical, grassroots shift.

Analytical generalisations: From information bubbles to Affective Hygiene. Rather than relying on state-led interventions, Ukrainian youth have independently internalised these countermeasures against the broader weaponisation of social media platforms (Singer & Brooking, 2018). They transformed these countermeasures into the core components of an organic Defensive Communication Strategy (DCS).

The self-reported “information bubble,” the construction of Cognitive Firewalls, and the retreat to community-curated local Telegram channels represent an adaptive psychological preservation mechanism. While early research warned that entertaining audiovisual content could subtly form audience loyalty to manipulative interpretations (Ivanova et al., 2022), the DCS framework reveals that insider communities can actively reverse this effect. By utilising protective humour as a cognitive shield, Ukrainian students successfully decode synthetic and hostile narratives, leveraging internet memes as vital instruments of collective resilience.

The deliberate reduction in news consumption, colloquially referred to by participants as a survival strategy, is not a symptom of political apathy or simple

news avoidance (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2022). Rather, it is a proactive practice of Affective Hygiene and Epistemic Vigilance necessary for sustaining long-term cognitive resilience (Citton, 2017).

Theoretical implications: DCS and the Irony Gap.

By presenting animal internet memes as a complex “system of images,” insider communities encode traumatic wartime experiences into highly spreadable (Jenkins et al., 2013) Digital Shibboleths. Nevertheless, this resilience is tightly bound to the insider community’s Vernacular Interpretive Framework, creating systemic vulnerability when these digital artefacts cross cultural borders.

The 2023 cross-cultural encounter provided the first evidence of this friction, revealing that the Digital Shibboleths — such as the memeified “war pets” like Patron or Syrskyi — are deeply context-dependent. While insider communities use these symbols to build solidarity and process trauma, outsiders frequently misinterpret them, lacking the shared cultural baseline required to decode the defensive intent.

This disconnect is exacerbated by the Irony Gap, a phenomenon explicitly identified by participants in the 2024–2025 focus groups. When crisis internet memes are stripped of their high-threat context and exported to Western audiences via algorithmic feeds, they undergo severe Context Collapse (Phillips & Milner, 2017) and cease to function as protective tools. Instead, they interact with the Digital Disenchantment (DD) prevalent in stable democracies (Figure 2).

Because Western youth often lack the contextual grounding to decode the defensive sarcasm, they risk interpreting these artefacts literally. As participants observed, absurd parodies — such as the AI-generated SpongeBob deepfake — can be misinterpreted by external audiences unfamiliar with the realities of the war as genuine evidence of Ukrainian instability or hostility. Overcoming this Irony Gap requires external audiences to recognise the epistemic agency of the insider community. Exercising this agency means moving beyond the passive observation of digital spaces to actively designing counter-narratives that reclaim local knowledge from the polarising effects of algorithmic curation.

This cross-cultural friction effectively transforms digital folklore into an engine of Algorithmic Obscurantism. When global audiences engage with serious geopolitical conflicts through feeds that prioritise ironic, decontextualised memetic content, it risks deepening political fatigue and cultivating a detached, superficial attitude. Ultimately, the tools that enable cognitive survival within Ukraine — when subjected to external algorithmic curation — can inadvertently reinforce hostile propaganda and undermine democratic solidarity abroad. Bridging this semantic gap requires a new paradigm of media literacy that moves beyond basic fact-checking to encompass the contextual decoding of visual vernaculars across drastically different threat environments.

4. Conclusion

This longitudinal study highlights a critical paradigm shift in the mechanisms of information warfare (Shapovalova, 2024) and audience resilience. By tracking the evolving media practices of Ukrainian youth across two distinct qualitative stages — from the initial cross-cultural articulation in 2023 to the in-depth focus groups of 2024–2025 — this research demonstrates that prolonged exposure to high-threat environments necessitates the organic development of a DCS. For these insider communities, tactical information filtering, the creation of protective digital bubbles, and the use of trauma-shielding humour are not indicators of political apathy, but essential tools for cognitive survival and psychological preservation.

However, the findings expose a severe systemic vulnerability at the intersection of grassroots resilience and global algorithmic curation. The study introduces the concept of Digital Shibboleths to explain why visual artefacts that effectively protect Ukrainian audiences fail to translate seamlessly across cultural borders. When algorithmically driven platforms export these highly contextualised memetic artefacts to Western audiences operating under DD, the resulting Irony Gap becomes a profound vector of Digital Obscurantism. Lacking the shared vernacular and lived experience of the conflict, external audiences risk interpreting defensive parodies literally. As the qualitative data confirms, this cross-cultural misinterpretation inadvertently validates hostile narratives, alienates the original creators, and threatens to degrade international democratic solidarity.

Ultimately, countering modern memetic warfare (Munk, 2024) requires a significant evolution in global media literacy frameworks. It is no longer sufficient to rely solely on institutional fact-checking or traditional

media education to address highly spreadable, emotionally charged digital content (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Future interventions must focus on teaching audiences to critically decode the cultural and contextual vernaculars of visual media, ensuring that the algorithmic distribution of defensive digital folklore does not inadvertently become a weapon against the very societies it was created to protect.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **Ethical statement.** All research procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with established institutional ethical standards for social science research. Participation in the focus groups and cross-cultural seminars was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection. To ensure participant safety and comply with ethical protocols in a high-threat environment, all personal identifiers were removed, and qualitative transcripts were completely anonymised prior to analysis.

Data Availability and FAIR Statement

To comply with Open Science policies and FAIR principles while protecting vulnerable participants in a high-threat environment, a structured, completely anonymised thematic coding framework (Thematic Codebook) has been generated. This dataset reflects the themes, codes, and depersonalised illustrative quotes mapping the data analysis process without risking participant de-anonymisation. The dataset is deposited in an open repository and is publicly accessible via DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.21264999](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21264999). Full raw conversational transcripts are withheld in accordance with strict ethical protocols governing research in conflict zones.

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Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

During the preparation of this work, the authors used generative AI (Gemini) solely as an auxiliary tool for language improvement (stylistic editing into British academic English), bibliographic structuring, and manuscript formatting in accordance with the journal's

requirements. After using this tool, the authors closely reviewed, edited, and approved all the text. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the final content. No substantive parts of the manuscript, including hypotheses, interpretations, or conclusions, were generated by artificial intelligence.

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Starkova Hanna, Yaresko Kateryna, Yehorova Oleksandra. Internet Memes as a Defensive Communication Strategy in High-Threat Environments: A Qualitative Study of Ukrainian Media Students

Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine has severely disrupted traditional forms of media consumption, forcing young adults to navigate high-threat, decentralised information environments. In this context, internet memes have emerged not merely as entertainment but as vital communicative units. While these visual artefacts of digital folklore serve as important defence mechanisms for audiences under constant threat, the humour embedded within them poses significant challenges for cross-cultural communication. This longitudinal qualitative study analyses the evolution of media practices among Ukrainian media students through the lens of a Defensive Communication Strategy (DCS). By tracing the trajectory from initial cross-cultural articulations in 2023 to the deepening algorithmic awareness observed in the 2024–2025 focus groups, the research explains this unique adaptive experience. The methodology employs a two-stage design: a cross-cultural online seminar to establish a baseline of external articulation, followed by subsequent in-depth online focus groups. Discursive analysis of anonymised transcripts reveals profound changes in media resilience. Ukrainian young adults are actively employing a DCS, erecting Cognitive Firewalls, practising Affective Hygiene and skilfully using Digital Shibboleths to interpret internet memes correctly. The research reveals a systemic vulnerability at the intersection of local community resilience and algorithmic curation: the Irony Gap. When highly contextualised, defensive internet memes are exported to Western audiences operating under Digital Disenchantment (DD), they are frequently misinterpreted. Lacking the shared vernacular, external audiences risk decoding defensive parodies literally, inadvertently validating hostile narratives and fostering Digital Obscurantism. Ultimately, the study concludes that addressing this Irony Gap requires global media literacy frameworks to evolve beyond basic fact-checking to encompass the contextual decoding of visual vernaculars.

Keywords: Defensive Communication Strategy, internet memes, media resilience, Irony Gap, digital folklore, Digital Disenchantment, media literacy, qualitative study.

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Internet Memes as a Defensive Communication Strategy in High-Threat Environments: A Qualitative Study of Ukrainian Media Students

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