DOGES GO TO WAR – THE INFLUENCE MECHANISMS OF NAFO MEMES IN RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In the era of digital communication, digital platforms increasingly meditate on cultural and political narratives. This thesis focused on the role of memes in the concept of geopolitical conflicts, with a distinct focus on their use in the Russia– Ukraine conflict. Detailed analysis of the Nordic Atlantic Fella Organization's memes the study also investigated the mechanisms used within the memes to influence the audience and how these digital artifacts served as a medium for hijacking and transforming conversations around war and geopolitical tensions. Memes are units of information which can be imitated and copied (Shifman, 2014). Also the narrative played a vital role in the research and it is defined as a representation of an event or events, including the story and the manner of its telling (Abbott, 2008). The study examined a dataset of 20 NAFO memes by employing a combination of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to dissect the many layers of memes and their meanings. Each meme was analysed separately, and the elements were thematised. The analysis revealed that memes act as powerful agents for shaping and spreading political narratives. Memes could subvert established discourses and promote a distinct kind of virtual unity among internet users worldwide. Memes could also be harmful in different conditions; those conditions were evaluated through media effects theory. This study emphasized the importance of memetic communication in altering narratives by showing the complex ways memes both supported and contradicted geopolitical discourse.

Key words

Memes, memetic warfare, narrative, NAFO, hijacking, convertibility, ownership, geopolitical conflict, media effects theory

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Tiivistelmä

Digitaalisen viestinnän aikakaudella digitaaliset alustat vaikuttavat yhä enemmän kulttuurisiin ja poliittisiin kertomuksiin. Tässä tutkielmassa keskityttiin meemien rooliin geopoliittisissa konflikteissa, erityisesti meemien käyttöön Venäjän ja Ukrainan välisessä konfliktissa. Tutkimuksessa analysoitiin yksityiskohtaisesti Nordic Atlantic Fella Organizationin (NAFO) meemejä sekä tutkittiin, millaisia mekanismeja meemeissä hyödynnettiin yleisöön vaikuttamiseksi. Tutkimuksessa tutkitaan myös, miten nämä digitaaliset artefaktit toimivat välineinä, joilla muokataan sotaa ja geopoliittisia jännitteitä koskevia narratiiveja. Meemit ovat tiedon yksiköitä, joita voidaan jäljitellä ja kopioida (Shifman, 2014). Myös narratiiveilla oli tärkeä rooli tutkimuksessa, ja se määritellään tapahtuman tai tapahtumien esittämiseksi, mukaan lukien tarina ja sen kertomisen tapa (Abbott, 2008). Tutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin 20 NAFO-meemistä koostuvaa aineistoa käyttämällä laadullisen sisällönanalyysin ja temaattisen analyysin yhdistelmää meemien ja niiden merkitysten monien kerrosten analysoimiseksi. Kukin meemi analysoitiin erikseen, jonka jälkeen elementit teemoitettiin. Tutkimuksessa käytettiin kvalitatiivisen sisällönanalyysin ja temaattisen analyysin yhdistelmää meemien ja niiden merkitysten analysoimiseksi. Analyysi paljasti, että meemit toimivat voimakkaina tekijöinä poliittisten narratiivien muokkaamisessa ja levittämisessä. Meemeillä on kyky kumota vakiintuneita diskursseja ja edistää erilaista virtuaalista yhtenäisyyttä internetin käyttäjien keskuudessa maailmanlaajuisesti. Meemit voivat olla myös haitallisia esimerkiksi disinformaation levittämiseen erilaisissa ympäristöissä. Tutkimuksen tulokset korostavat meemiviestinnän merkitystä ja sitä, miten ne voivat muuttaa narratiivia erilaisilla elementeillä.

Asiasanat

Memes, memetic warfare, narrative, NAFO, hijacking, convertibility, ownership, geopolitical conflict, media effects theory

Säilytyspaikka

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the use of memes in digital communication in conflict situations. As digital platforms become increasingly central to the dissemination of information, memes have evolved from their origins as cultural curiosity to powerful tools that can shape and even hijack the discourse on complex subjects in volatile environments such as international conflicts. Previous studies have investigated the persuasion and use of memes for propaganda (DeCook, 2018). Studies have also focused on memes as components of digital culture, examining their role in entertainment and social interaction (Shifman, 2014). Scholarly discourse has often centered on the humorous and viral nature of memes, as initially conceptualized by Dawkins (1976). However, there has recently been a shift toward understanding the broader implications of memes in sociopolitical contexts, particularly in shaping public opinion and narratives (Pamment, 2014). One great example of this public opinion shaping is the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where an imageboard called 4chan created a flood of pro-trump memes and altered public opinion of the candidates (Merrin, 2019). This was called memetic warfare. This master's thesis aims to continue and further develop this tradition by specifically examining how memes, within the context of conflict situation-related discussions, influence and sometimes oversimplify the complex narratives of war and international relations.

Memes are units of information which can be imitated and copied (Shifman, 2014). They are vehicles carrying the information within cultural contexts. (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) Since memes are stories told through images, narratives play a vast role in in this study. Narrative is a representation of an event or events, including the story and the manner of its telling (Abbott, 2008). Narrative is how the story is told, and that is what this study is about.

It is essential to investigate memes more deeply in the context of warfare and conflicts. Memes have significant impact on public perception about the conflicts, rapid virality, dissemination, and potential misinformation. In this study the public impact and virality will only be assessed. This study delves into the transformative power of memes in redefining public discourse, extending beyond mere digital artifacts to become potent vehicles of cultural and political expression. The presence of political influence in this study may vary, because of the multifaceted nature of memes. While some literature and case studies focus on the political ramifications of memes, especially related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, other sources solely focus on memes as tools of communication. This research will focus on the memes shared and created by the @NAFO_Official X account related to the Russia- Ukraine conflict. These perspectives will be examined through the following research question:

1. What are the influence mechanisms utilized in the NAFO memes?

This study will be structured as follows. First, key terms are clearly defined, including narratives, memes, and elements referring to memes and meme influence. A detailed examination of the key terms constructs a clear foundation for this thesis. After the theoretical framework is set, follows the methodology where the steps made in the data collection and analysis are clarified and justified. The methodology employed in this research includes qualitative research methods, qualitative content analysis, and thematic analysis. Data will be collected from @NAFO_Official X/Twitter account, focusing on NAFO memes, including the symbol of their community, 'Fella'. Finally, the results and analysis were obtained. The discussion section culminates in exploring future research opportunities, examining the transformative power of NAFO memes, and integrating theoretical insights with empirical findings.

The ChatGPT 4.0 artificial intelligence application (https://chat.openai.com/) was used for brainstorming, rephrasing, and grammar corrections. Brainstorming with AI focused on the HOC-analysis and the harmfulness of the memes.

2 NARRATIVES

In this chapter, the concept of narrative is dissected from various perspectives. Narratives are fundamental to human communication, serving as the backbone for conveying experiences, ideas, and values across time and space. They are not mere stories but complex constructs that shape and are shaped by the societies from which they emerge. (Baker, 2010) This chapter delves into the intricacies of narratives, exploring their construction, ownership, and the dynamics of their evolution and influence. Narratives will be described in detail, and the nuances of their ownership will be explored. In addition, the vulnerability of narratives to hijacking or convertibility will be assessed. This exploration of narratives is particularly relevant to understanding how war narratives are shaped and re-shaped in modern conflict situations.

2.1 Definition of narrative

The term 'narrative' encompasses a myriad of definitions, reflecting its multifaceted nature and the varied perspectives from which it can be approached. Abbott's (2008) definition of narrative was chosen for this thesis due to its emphasis on the representation of events and the accompanying narrative discourse. This approach aligns seamlessly with the thesis's focus on war narratives and international relations, providing a robust framework for analysing how different events are portrayed and interpreted across diverse platforms and cultural contexts. Narrative could be considered through a historical event, for example the fall of the Berlin Wall. The event itself is historical, but the stories around it evolve and showcase differently according to the author and the audience. These narratives are constructed through various means: political speeches that herald a new dawn of freedom, news reports that depict jubilant crowds tearing down the wall, and personal stories of families reunited after decades of separation.

According to (Ryan, 2017) narrative is a carefully arranged series of events to engage and move people, both in emotional and intellectual levels. It is more like a story that follows familiar path, designed to draw listeners in, developing excitement and depth as it unfolds.

(Kreuter et al., 2007) Characterizes narratives as a structured story. A narrative can be characterized as a structured story that follows a clear progression— starting with the introduction and moving through a climax and conclusion. It provides information about the scene, the characters, and the main conflict or issue. Moreover, it poses questions or depicts conflicts that are not immediately resolved but eventually provide a resolution or denouement (Kreuter et al., 2007.)

Stories or narrative message formats representing events in which characters pursue goals that evolve. (Kreuter et al., 2007). "

As Kreuter et. al presented narratives as structured story, Martínez-Alcañiz (2018) also proposed that narratives have different structures, offering varied interpretations to the crucial questions of who, what, when, where, and how in storytelling. The main argument is that there are now infinite ways to tell a story. Narrative theorists differentiate between depicted events, which adhere to an "ideal" chronological and spatial sequence, and the presentation of events, where discourse is not strictly tied to traditional mimetic norms. As mentioned, Abbott (2008) has the same approach to narratives with represented events and the representation of events (discourse). The actual event and the discourse of the events usually have a tension:

1. **Represented Events**: These are tangible happenings or occurrences within a narrative, often following a logical, chronological, or spatial sequence.
2. **Representation of Events (Discourse)**: This focuses on the method or style by which these events are relayed. This representation may diverge from standard or expected narrative structures, adopting more avant-garde or unconventional approaches.

Puckett (2016) investigates the interesting conflict that occurs when the way a story is told does not match with the actual events. For example, when a story that happens in order is told out of order. He explores how storytellers handle this challenge, balancing between telling the story straightforwardly and adding their own creative twists.

Shifting the focus, Herman et al. (2010) present a contrasting view in which they emphasize the omnipresence of narratives across diverse cultures, underscoring their universal appeal. Despite divergent themes and motifs, the underlying structure of narratives often showcases striking similarities. This aspect suggests an intrinsic human need to share stories that resonate with familiar rhythms — whether heroic journeys, romantic escapades, conflicts, or resolutions

Building upon these viewpoints, it becomes evident that narratives are not static entities. They evolve, adapt, and transform alongside changes in literary forms and artistic expressions over time. As Herman et al. (2010) aptly illustrate, narratives are not bound by temporal constraints; they are dynamic and responsive to cultural shifts.

Conversely, delved into the definition provided by Abbott (2008), who crystallizes a fundamental aspect of narratives. Abbott (2008), suggests that at its core, narrative hinges on "the representation of an event or series of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse; story is an event or sequence of events (the action); and narrative discourse is those events as represented." (Abbott, 2008, p.19).

Richardson (2000) ,in his scholarly work, also posits that "narrative is a representation of causally related series of events" encapsulates the definition of a narrative. This definition can be used in both verbal and nonverbal narratives.

As said, narrative is not a single story or an event, but a combination of those, and event is the keyword in this definition. Abbott (2008) states that if something must happen, then it is only narrative, which underscores the essential criterion for categorizing a discourse as a narrative within the realm of narrative theory. This implies that in the conceptualization of narrative, the presence of a succession of events or occurrences is essential. In essence, for a discourse to qualify as a narrative, it must encompass a structured series of actions or happenings unfolding over a temporal trajectory. Without this essential element of consecutive occurrences, the discourse cannot be classified as a narrative. This claim highlights the centrality of events or acts as a distinguishing feature for determining the limits of narratives within the theoretical framework.

Adding another dimension, Baker (2010) elaborates on narratives in an article; narrative is viewed not just as a linguistic or visual element but as an entire story with characters, settings, and plots, deeply influenced by social practices and constructions of reality. Baker's approach allows for the examination of narratives across various texts, events, and media, understanding them as components of larger, interrelated stories that extend beyond mere linguistic accuracy.

Baker (2010) proposes four different types of narratives. The article states that "Narratives are the stories we tell ourselves and others about the world(s) in which we live" (Baker, 2010, p. 350). Because narratives, as mentioned above, are widely explained, and defined, they can also be easily divided into different categories according to Baker.

The first category of narratives under consideration is personal narratives. Baker (2010) defines personal narratives as follows: personal narratives primarily revolve around individuals while positioning them at the core of the story. These narratives encompass everyday exchanges with acquaintances, self-reflections about ones' identity and relationship with the world, as well as the life stories of notable public figures such as Nelson Mandela and Edward Said. Essentially, biographies and autobiographies fall under this category of narrative.

In the second category, Baker (2010) referred to public narratives as those developed within and disseminated by broader social and institutional structures, surpassing individual realms. These structures may include families, religious organizations, educational institutions, political groups, media outlets, and even entire nations.

Bakers' definitions of personal and public narratives are not as clear as they are written. Personal and public narratives often intersect, making it challenging to

distinctly separate the two. While no narrative is entirely personal because of external influences and perceptions, individuals typically anchor their self-identities by referencing dominant public narratives. Similarly, these public narratives gain significance when individuals resonate with and adopt them. There exists a mutual dependence, where dominant public narratives can shape personal identities, but individual stories can also influence and modify overarching societal narratives, either by generating empathy or reinforcing stereotypes (Baker, 2010).

Baker introduces the concept of disciplinary narratives as the third category. These narratives, while primarily established within academic fields, frequently surpass the limits of scholarly environments. These narratives craft a lens for specific expert investigations, yet their influence frequently permeates broader societal realms. Just as individual stories are not isolated from societal influences, disciplinary narratives are not exclusively confined to their academic domains. The broader society might embrace or challenge these narratives, thus establishing a dialog between academic knowledge and public understanding. These dynamics underscore the interconnectedness between specialized knowledge and its broader societal implications (Baker, 2010).

Finally, according to Baker (2010), meta-narratives are expansive tales that influence vast societal landscapes. While they serve as grand stories shared across cultures and generations, their boundaries with other narratives remain fluid. Their profound and pervasive nature draws individuals, communities, and entire societies into their fold. However, just as personal stories may be influenced by societal perspectives, meta-narratives can also be reshaped by localized narratives or events. This suggests a reciprocal relationship, where grand stories inform individual and community identities, yet these smaller stories also have the power to redefine the overarching narratives in subtle or profound ways (Baker, 2010).

Richardson's (2000) approach to defining narrative exhibits notable similarities to that of Baker. Both acknowledge the multifaceted nature of narratives. Approached narratives from four different perspectives: temporal, causal, minimal, and transactional. First, temporal narratives are representations of events that happen in a time sequence that define the narrative. The second one, causal, refers to causal connection; nevertheless, inclining between the events is fundamental according to Richardson. It is important to understand the connection between two different events. The third approach, minimal, focuses on small changes in events; any statement about an action or event is a narrative since it shows a change from one situation to another. The transactional approach simplifies only the way the text is read, instead of a characteristic or core element present in the text.

Among the four methods, Richardson indicates that the most frequently employed are the temporal and causal approaches. Prince (2003) also defined

narratives as "at least two real or fictive events in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" (Prince, 2003, p.97). Cohn (2000) also focused on how narratives are represented. It is important in her research that those events or statements are casually related to each other.

As we transition from examining the categorization of narratives into various types, our attention shifts to Maan (2014) ,who discusses about narratives and ideas and how they are often misunderstood or mixed. It is crucial to clarify and understand the differences between these two concepts. Narratives serve as foundational structures from which ideas are conceptualized and developed. Narrative structures provide a framework for the formation and consolidation of individual and collective beliefs or ideologies. These entrenched beliefs or ideologies subsequently guide, inform, and influence the actions and behaviours of individuals and groups within sociocultural contexts. Narratives play a pivotal role in shaping our identity.

As Maan (2014) previously articulated, ideas do not engender action until they are narrated. For example, the statement, 'Islam is under attack,' serves as an illustrative example of an idea framed as an assertion. It is crucial to differentiate between mere assertions and narratives. While the former posits a straightforward claim, narratives delve deeper, ascribing motivation and assigning meaning to the series of events and contexts that substantiate such assertions. In essence, while the assertion provides a title or a claim, the narrative elucidates the underlying motivations and implications attached to that claim. Maan (2014) emphasises that narratives' purpose is not the truth, but the meaning since ideas are mostly either truth or false.

Maan (2014) emphasises in their study that narratives do not rely in any circumstances on their truth-value. Narratives keep spreading even though they are not true. For people to be influenced by the narrative, it is indispensable that the narrator is credible in the eyes of the audience.

Maan (2014) posits that to make different propaganda or messages go through and make them as effective as possible, there must be a narrative strategy. It is crucial to delve into the underlying significance of the message, rather than merely presenting an attention-grabbing headline. The narrative should be structured in a way that guides the audience toward the intended interpretation.

Maan (2014) discusses the strategic importance of public diplomacy, while Pamment (2014) emphasizes the often-overlooked role of storytelling and narratives in international relations for its effectiveness. Strategic narratives are built on the perception that storytelling can be planned forward to support international political goals. The term "strategic narratives" can be used to denote the way nations present themselves and their aspirations in foreign interactions. Such an organization not only aids in making sense of these events but can also

guide them toward a specific outcome by selectively emphasizing certain aspects. However, it is worth noting that narratives, while useful, can offer a skewed representation of events, because they "captures only one aspect of theatre" (Antoniades et al., 2010, p.5)

With the multifaceted exploration of narratives this chapter has highlighted the pivotal role of narratives in human communication and cultural expression. Building on the foundations of Abbott (2008) and Ryan (2017), we have seen how narratives serve as tools for representing complex series of events and engaging audiences on an emotional and intellectual level. Baker (2010) and Kreuter et al. (2007) further enrich our understanding by highlighting the adaptability of narratives and their grounding in social practices. These will be further applied in the analysis of NAFO memes. To address these inquiries the following sections will systematically examine NAFO memes trough identified frameworks of narratives. This examination aims to validate the theoretical propositions by applying them to empirical data, thereby testing their relevance and robustness in the context of digital warfare narratives.

2.2 Hijackability, ownership and convertibility: HOC-analysis

Narratives serve as the backbone of communication, incorporating complex concepts into coherent stories that appeal to audiences. However, the power of narratives comes not just from its original composition and presentation but also from its ability to be adapted and even co-opted by others. The following chapter will present HOC-analysis which concludes three concepts within narrative: hijackability, ownership and convertibility.

In the development of this study three key concepts were identified - ownership, hijackability and convertibility - that are essential to comprehending the dynamic lifecycle of narratives. Concepts are partly from existing literature and partly from novel insight. These concepts were chosen because of their relevance to the study of memes within the context of conflict situations. Existing literature informs us that understanding the creator and disseminator of the meme is crucial for analysing the impact and intent of the narrative (Shuman, 2015). This is why *ownership* must be taken into consideration. *Hijackability* plays a significant role in informative warfare, where narratives can be rapidly altered or repurposed to serve opposing or harmful agendas (Kotseva, 2023). To understand the diversity and the ability to adapt, *convertibility* must be evaluated. It reveals the resilience and relevance across different contexts and illuminates the dynamic interplay between the original and converted intent. In this study, the definition of *convertibility* has been specifically adapted from (Ting-Toomey, 1999) to fit this study, since it has no previous research.

Table 1. Key concepts in HOC: hijackability, ownership and convertibility.

CONCEPT	DEFINITION
OWNERSHIP	Ownership in the context of a narrative refers to the control, origin, or authorship of the narrative. It represents who has the authority or right to create, alter, or disseminate the narrative. "Ownership follow unstated, culturally specific rules about who has a right to tell about particular experiences and in what way, to whom." (Shuman, 2015, p.53)
HIJACKABILITY	Hijackability refers to the ease with which narratives can be altered, co-opted, or changed by external forces. If the narrative can be separated from its original creator or source Hijacking is defined as "taking control of a message, messenger, narrative or other artifact of communication of undesirable purposes without consent" (Hautala et. al. 2024, p.2).
CONVERTIBILITY	Narratives' convertibility is its capacity to shift shape, setting, or meaning without losing sight of its core message or source. "Mutually adapt to each other's behaviors appropriately and flexibly" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 261)

Hijackability, ownership and convertibility levels can vary from low to moderate to high. Those levels can be defined as it follows in the next table. These definitions allow these levels to be approached in the future research.

Table 2 HOC-levels.

CONCEPT / LEVEL	LOW	MODERATE	HIGH

OWNERSHIP	The narrative is predominantly public or communal, with minimal control or claim by any individual or specific group.	The narrative is influenced or partially controlled by specific groups or individuals but remains open to public interpretation and adaptation.	The narrative is strongly controlled or originated by an individual or a specific group, with a clear authorship or source, and limited public alteration.
HIJACKABILITY	The narrative is resilient to external influence or alteration because of its strong, established roots (e.g., historical, cultural) or specific authorship.	The narrative can be influenced or altered by external factors, but it retains core elements or messages despite modifications.	The narrative is highly susceptible to alteration, reinterpretation, or repurposing by external sources, often losing its original context, or meaning.
CONVERTIBILITY	The narrative is fixed in its structure or content, allowing for minimal or no adaptation to different contexts or interpretations.	The narrative allows for some level of adaptation or reinterpretation, although it maintains certain core elements or themes.	The narrative is highly adaptable and can be reshaped or re-contextualized in various forms while retaining its recognizability or core message.

In the following table, narratives are sorted out by their author, main points, ownership, hijackability, and convertibility. First is the definition of narrative followed by the main points of the source. Finally, ownership, hijackability and convertibility are evaluated, and the level of each dynamic is defined and justified.

Table 3 Analysis of different narrative definitions.

Definition / Quote	Main points	Ownership	Hijackability	Convertibility

"Stories consists of characters, setting, and events" (Ryan, 2017, p.520). "Intentional design that exercises strict control over the audience's cognitive and emotional experience" (Ryan, 2018, p. 521).	• Consists of different elements. • Could be created with multiple events. • Focus on attempting to captivate the audience.	Level: Low/ Moderate The narrative creator or storyteller. Ryan's focus on crafting narratives to captivate audiences implies that the author or storyteller has primary control and ownership over the narrative.	Level: Moderate Ryan's definition exhibits emotional and cognitive involvement, indicating a potential for reinterpretation or hijacking, particularly in situations where emotions are high.	Level: High Structured account of events with a focus on audience engagement implies flexibility in adapting narratives to different contexts or perspectives.
"An entire narrative, understood as a concrete story of some aspect of the world, complete with characters, settings, outcomes or projected outcomes and plot" (Baker, 2010, p.349). "And encourages us to look beyond the text into the political and social context of interaction." (Baker, 2010, p.350).	• The entire story is filled with different entities and outcomes. • Influenced by external parties	Level: Low Socially Influenced. Narratives, according to Baker, are deeply influenced by social practices and realities, suggesting that ownership might extend beyond individual authors to the social or cultural groups that influence them.	Level: Moderate Certain narratives can be reinterpreted because of the impact of social practices and reality constructs	Level: Moderate Narratives grounded in social practices may evolve or change with societal shifts.
"The representation of an event or series of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse; story is an event or sequence of events (the action); and narrative discourse is those events as represented." (Abbott, 2008 p. 19).	• Both verbal and nonverbal narratives. • Four different types of narratives; personal, public, disciplinary, and meta-narrative.	Level: Moderate Author/Discourse Creator. Abbott's definition, which focuses on the representation of events, suggests that the person or entity framing and presenting the narrative (such as a writer, filmmaker, or journalist) holds ownership	Level: High The focus on narrative discourse allows for varying interpretations and potential hijacking, especially in the representation of events.	Level: High The distinction between story and discourse suggests that narratives can be adapted or converted to fit different representational styles.

"Currently, four basic approaches to the definition of narrative are in use; we may designate these as temporal, causal, minimal, and transactional" (Richardson, 2000, p.169).	• Temporal and causal approaches are the most common in narratives.	Level: Varies Richardson's four perspectives on narratives imply different ownerships-from individual (in personal narratives) to collective (in transactional narratives influenced by cultural or social interpretations).	Level: Variates by perspective Temporal and causal narratives may be less prone to hijacking than minimal or transactional narratives.	Level: High The four different perspectives indicate a wide range of adaptability in narrative construction and interpretation.
"Ideas and narratives and a misunderstanding about how each function. It is the narrative that is doing the mobilizing" (Maan, 2016, p.14). "Narratives do not necessarily tell the truth; they tell the meaning". (Maan & Paul Cobaugh, 2018, p.15).	• Clear definition of idea and narrative • Truth is not a crucial aspect	Level: Moderate Idea Originator and Narrator. Maan's emphasis on narratives giving shape and context to ideas suggests that ownership resides with those who originate and articulate the ideas within the narrative.	Level: Moderate The emphasis on narrative's role in shaping and contextualizing ideas suggests some vulnerability to manipulation or hijacking.	Level: High Narrative interpretation and adaptation are subject to flexibility when the objective of the story is prioritized over fact.
"Hence, they provide distinct meanings to the main questions that stories aim to answer, namely: the *what*, the *who*, the *where*, the *when*, and the *how*." (Martínez-Alcañiz, 2018.p 402). "Field of narrative theory, thus offering a dialectical performance that opposes story versus discourse" (Martínez-Alcañiz, 2018.p 402).	• Clear difference between actual events and the discourse of events • Giving the answer to the question to which narrative is an answer.	Level: Potentially varies. Given the emphasis on different structures and the distinction between events and discourse, the ownership might depend on the type of narrative and its context. It could range from individual authors to collective cultural narratives.	Level: High Similar to Abbott; The flexibility in narrative structures and the distinction between events and discourse could allow for various degrees of narrative hijacking	Level: High The emphasis on varied structures and the distinction between actual events and discourse suggests a high level of adaptability and convertibility in narratives, allowing for diverse interpretations and contextualization.

This chapter has laid the groundwork for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics within narratives, particularly focusing on hijackability, ownership, and convertibility. These elements are crucial for understanding the complex interplay between the meme creators' intentions and the transformative journey memes go through in diverse contexts. Delving into these aspects invaluable insights are gained about adaptability and resilience of meme narratives. Both the evolution and change of the narratives, but also how they preserve the core message across cultural and platform changes. Determining the underlying goals and intentions behind these communication acts also requires an examination of narrative ownership.

2.3   Weaponized narratives

Allenby (2017) defines weaponized narratives as the use of information and communication technologies to create and spread stories targeted at enemy's institutions, identity, and civilization. Weaponized narrative way of operating is to increase the complexity and confusion and worsen political and social divisions. The domain of warfare is a field where the adversary targets the culture and value-based foundations of an opponent. The historical perspective of weaponized narratives goes way back to previous practises such as disinformation, information warfare, propaganda, and psychological operations. Their main goal, at the tactical level, is to destabilize and confuse opponents by employing information warfare to weaken them without resorting to conventional warfare. From a strategic standpoint, weaponized narratives are a long-term tactic used to gradually weaken the influence and strength of powerful opponents. (Allenby, 2017.)

Tyushka (2022) has brought up Russian's weaponization on narrative toward Europe. In the Russian narrative, they seek to challenge Europe's normative power internationally and undermine the credibility and trust. Examples of this narrative are portraying Europe as 'non-existing Europe' and 'Gayropa'. According to this research, Russia published over 9000 instances of fake news and mass propaganda campaigns against the EU in 2014 and 2015.

In their article weaponized narrative is also defined as using communication as a form of warfare instead of conventional weapons. It says that primary victims are "truth reason and reflection" (Tyushka, 2022, p.120). With the help of Allenby's definition and their own additions Tyushka and Allenby both have the same definitions for the weaponized narrative, which concludes the definition used for this thesis.

Weaponized narratives are carefully chosen stories that are inserted into the information environment with the intention of undermining opponents by taking advantage of their cognitive weaknesses and influencing public opinion. They

are characterized by their ability to adapt to contemporary communication technologies and their potency in subverting political and military agendas (Allenby, 2017, Tyushka, 2022).

This chapter established a foundation on how memes can be used in the communicative warfare, and how it is done. The following sections will evaluate how the weaponization is done with NAFO memes.

3   MEMES

In the digital age, memes have evolved into significant cultural artifacts, far surpassing their initial perception as mere fleeting jokes or cultural references. Dawkins (1976) originally conceptualized memes as units of cultural evolution, analogous to genes, representing ideas or behaviours that spread throughout culture. This transformative view of memes as pivotal elements in cultural dissemination is further supported by recent data. "Memes are central and often unrecognized elements in creating the type of societal narratives that help us as humans relate to the world around us." (Waddock, 2016, p.93) A social media behaviour survey by YPulse (2023) revealed that a staggering 75% of users aged 13–36 regularly engage with memes, with 30% sharing them daily. This chapter explores the constructs of memes and memefication, drawing upon previous scholarly research for insights. The discussion will then extend to categorizing different types of memes and their roles in shaping cultural narratives.

3.1   Semiotic analysis on memes

By examining the world of memes through the semiotic lens, one can see how words and pictures interact to produce a special kind of communication. This is a complicated interplay of signals and meanings. Semiotic analysis effectively interprets visual signs and their meanings (Liepe, 2022). In semiotics, communication messages are constructed from signs that generate meaning. In semiotics, the receiver's interpretation is more crucial than the creator's intent in communication. (Fiske, 2012.) Semiotics consist of two parts: signification, i.e., the study of meanings, communication (Tarasti, 2012). Memes have both parts. Memes always have a certain meaning, and they are communication tools.

Because memes are signs and have meanings, it is crucial to approach them from a semiotic point of view. Signs do not have a clear definition, but their meaning could be concluded "Signs solely exist to carry meaning that is to be (though has not necessarily yet been) interpreted" (Zhao, 2023, p. 60.) In addition according to Atkin, signs have meaning only when they are interpreted. (Atkin, 2010.) His review posits that signs are signifiers; they could be speech, written words, or anything with a message.

Applying this concept to memes often combines images with text, creating unique meanings through this confrontation. For example, a meme might use an image from a popular movie, originally with a serious context, and overlay it with humorous or ironic text, altering its meaning. This process of signification, in which the meaning of a meme is generated through the interaction of image

and text, is central to meme communication. The interpretation of these signs depends on the audience's cultural and contextual knowledge. In essence, a meme's significance lies not in its individual components but in the combined interpretation of image and text, reflecting both the creator's intent and the audience's perception. This semiotic analysis helps us understand how memes humorously and efficiently communicate complex ideas, often reflecting or critiquing societal norms and behaviours. This semiotic approach clarifies how memes are humorous and effectively convey complex concepts, frequently reflecting or challenging social norms and behaviours.
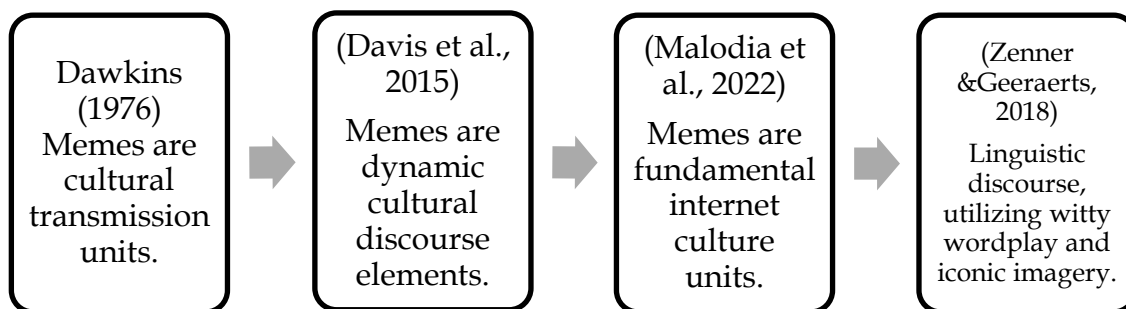
3.2   Memes

Zulli and Zulli, (2022) assert that internet meme is an idea or concept that replicates and transmits rapidly across internet users. Since Richard Dawkins first introduced the concept of the meme in 1976, its definition and understanding have undergone significant evolution. Originally proposed as an analogy to genes, memes were conceptualized as fundamental units of cultural transmission. This analogy underscored the way ideas, behaviours, and styles spread within a culture, such as how genetic information is transmitted biologically. Over time, this understanding has been refined and expanded. Davis et al. (2015) emphasized the role of memes as vehicles for disseminating diverse forms of information within cultural contexts. This comprehensive perspective situates memes not just as simple carriers of cultural data, but also as dynamic elements actively shaping and reflecting the evolution of cultural discourse.

The evolution of the concept of memes according to Malodia et al. (2022) became synonymous with the unit of internet culture. Nowadays, memes play a fundamental role in communication on different internet platforms. (Vásquez & Aslan, 2021).

The fourth stage of meme evolution, after becoming a unit of internet culture, evolved into a linguistic discourse. According to Zenner & Geeraerts (2018), the witty exploitation of words can be employed to create memes. Memes include different types of words, expressions, recognizable references, iconic imagery, and expressions. (Cannizzaro, 2016) n linguistic discourse, memes play a vast role in how different words or expressions are exploited. It could be a misspelling or nonstandard language used by customers (Dynel, 2016). In this rapidly changing digital era, memes have solidified their role as a pipeline for online interaction and a measure of the widespread appeal and shareability of content. (Malodia et al., 2022).

Table 4 Evolution of memes.

Dawkins (1976) Memes are cultural transmission units.	→	(Davis et al., 2015) Memes are dynamic cultural discourse elements.	→	(Malodia et al., 2022) Memes are fundamental internet culture units.	→	(Zenner &Geeraerts, 2018) Linguistic discourse, utilizing witty wordplay and iconic imagery.

When becoming a linguistic model, discourse researchers have divided memes into different categories. One of them is (Shifman, 2014) divides memes into different *meme genres*. Genres are not only unified by their form and stylistic traits but also by common themes, subjects, and target demographics. In this study the memes will be divided into nine genres:

1. Reaction Photoshops: Part of the internet memes since the early 2000s (Kuipers, 2002). Reaction Photoshop involves editing images to create varied humorous responses to viral photos. It originated from "Tourist Guy"-meme, where a man stands in the World Trade Center and a plane approaches the tower. (Shifman, 2014)

2. Photo Fads: Photo fad memes are a popular genre in which individuals strike peculiar poses or perform specific actions to be photographed and shared online. Examples include "planking," where people lie flat in unexpected places, and other viral phenomena. (Knowyourmeme, 2023)

3. Flash Mob: Flash mobs involve a spontaneous assembly of people in a public spot, engaging in a quick, coordinated activity such as a dance, a 'freeze' moment, or even a mock zombie parade, before rapidly dispersing. These events are pre-arranged via digital communication and are frequently captured for sharing on social media sites such as YouTube (Shifman, 2014.)

4. Lip-synch / Lip dub: Lip-synch (or lip dub) videos feature individuals or groups syncing their lip movements precisely with the lyrics of a well-known song. (Shifman, 2014). The popularity of these videos increased significantly as TikTok gained prominence. (Zeng & Abidin, 2021)

5. Misheard Lyrics: Based on different types of mistranslations in songs, where the original meaning of the song is alternated with phonetics (Kendall, 2008).

6. Recut Trailers: Recut trailers are a type of digital satire in which original film content is altered to create completely new tales, frequently with a hilarious twist. They have been criticized for spoiling the movie, but after all, it is just a show-off for the skill creators who created different types of movie clips. (Shifman, 2014)

7. LOLCats: Cats with misspelled captions. Captions usually refer to the situation happening in the photo. LOL is an acronym from 2007, which was created from the words Laughing Out Loud. (Shifman, 2014)

8. These are memes that refer to stock characters representing different stereotypical behaviours. For example "Scumbag Steve" or " Good Guy Greg"(Shifman, 2014.)

9. Rage comics: "Rage comics are amateur-looking comics featuring "rage faces" — a set of expressive characters, each associated with a typical behaviour." (Shifman, 2014) These memes typically portray anger or some other fundamental feeling or action. Rage comics and stock character macros have a lot in common, but stock character macros use a single image with different captions to humorously depict universal traits, while rage comics tell short stories through sequences of exaggerated cartoon faces, capturing the emotional escalation of relatable situations.

After dividing memes into nine different genres, those genres can still be separated into three different groups. Meme genres are classified as follows: (1) "*documentation of "real-life" moment* genres, which focus on spontaneous real-world occurrences such as picture fads. Genres included in this group are always connected to nondigital space. (2) "*Explicit manipulation*" genres, exhibiting creative reworkings of well-known media, signifying an extensive connection to popular culture, for example, misheard lyrics or photoshops. (3) "*A new universe of digital and meme-oriented content*" genres, which include LOLCats and other memes deeply ingrained in online communities' language and reflecting a particular cultural literacy inside certain online subcultures. (Shifman, 2014)

In addition, Shifman (2014) prefers to isolate memes into three different dimensions of cultural items that can be imitated by people and not just define them as units of imitation, as Dawkins emphasizes. Shifman's first dimension concerns the *content* of a certain text, which refers to its ideas and ideologies. The second dimension is the *form*. Form is the physical manifestation of a message interpreted through our sense perceptions. This dimension combines the visual and auditory aspects that are unique to certain texts as well as their advanced forms that are unique to a certain genre, as demonstrated by phenomena such as lip-syncing in videos or the use of animation. The third dimension, *stance,* is the attitude or perspective conveyed by the meme creator. Creators may differentiate the message of the meme and, in that way, alter the effects of the meme to the audience.

Shifman, (2014) deep investigation of memes focuses on dividing them. Again, there are three different positions for the nature of memes: *mentalist driven, behavior driven, and inclusive.* Mentalist driven nature is advocated by eminent academics in the field of memes. In this school of thought, memes are not just simple ideas such as warm, blue, or square. In the mentalist driven nature, memes are

more convoluted, such as ideas of the alphabet, chess, or impressionism. (Dennett, 1995). As Dawkins (1976) posits in his definition of memes, memes are to be passed on to another person. To do this, memes are "loaded" on different vehicles that can be images, artifacts, rituals, or images. These observable vehicles are the "visible manifestations of genes". In other words, memes are ideas, and meme vehicles are tangible expressions (Shifman, 2014.)

Behavior-driven memes are again seen as different behaviours and artifacts, not ideas (Gatherer, 1998). In the behaviourist model, memes are viewed as inseparable from their expressions in events, practices, and texts, always existing as encoded information. This perspective suggests that memes, as concrete units, cannot be detached from their real-world manifestations, allowing for empirical study of their evolution and diffusion (Shifman, 2014.)

When talking about *inclusive memetic approach*, any information that can be imitated and copied is considered a meme. However, this wide-ranging definition may reduce its analytical effectiveness by grouping diverse elements under one large concept. (Shifman, 2014)

Memes have increasingly become a focal point in academic research, particularly regarding their intersection with informal cultural discourse and formal political spheres, as noted by Penney (2020). Their capacity to encapsulate and convey values effectively, as Shifman (2019) observes, allows them to act as a form of "visual political rhetoric" (Huntington, 2016, p.78), shaping and mirroring our political perceptions (Glăveanu et al., 2018). Research by Ross & Rivers (2017) and Shifman (2014) indicates that memes significantly contribute to the framing of news events and the moulding of political attitudes and behaviours. This is further echoed by Vickery (2014), who notes their role in challenging or reinforcing dominant ideologies. The ideological versatility of political memes is highlighted by Makhortykh & González Aguilar (2020) and Smith (2019), who show their use in political propaganda and anti-establishment critique despite their potential to bridge diverse political views, as suggested by Milner (2013). From these results, it can be concluded that memes significantly effect on people's opinions and different social structures.

Davidson (2009) posits that internet memes are a subset of cultural memes that spread virally through social media. Memes are presented as amateur-produced images or graphics that may be superimposed with text. This definition specifically pertains to internet memes and may not align with the characteristics of memes outside the internet context. Shifman (2014) defines internet memes as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which … were created with awareness of each other, and … were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman, 2014, p.7-8). As seen, the internet has brought the digital point of view to memes, and the concept and intention have preserved the same format.

Susan Blackmore's *The Meme Machine* (2000) presents behavioural driven memetics such as ideas brain-initiated behaviours represented in books, maps and music (Blackmore, 2000). Thus, all information that can be replicated through imitation might be labelled a meme. Shifman (2014) criticises Blackmore's point of view because of its lack of analytical power. In reevaluating common perspectives on memes, Shifman (2014) introduces an alternative framework for understanding memes. This framework rests on two key ideas: first, memes encompass multiple imitable dimensions, meaning they are not just singular ideas but complex units with various elements that can be replicated; second, memes should be seen not merely as isolated entities that spread effectively but rather as clusters of related content that share identifiable features.

For the purposes of this thesis, Shifman's (2014) definition of memes was selected because of its analytical utility in categorizing memes into distinct groups. This classification approach is particularly advantageous for an in-depth examination of the diverse types and functions of memes within the scope of this study.

3.3   Influence of memes

But why are memes such a good tool for influencing? Because most of the memes we face in communication are seen on social media and 5.9 billion people have access to the internet (*Worldometer - Real Time World Statistics*, 2024.), memes gain global exposure and traverse cultural and geographical boundaries. This indicates that a vast number of people are exposed to memes.

Influence in this context is defined as affecting recipients by using time, communication channels, content selection, form, and packaging to lead them to the intended conclusion through logical reasoning. (Stamatin 2017). In the digital age, which is characterized by a vast amount of information, people often fall prey to confirmation bias. They tend to seek for information that aligns with their own beliefs (Nyhan, 2010).

Why are memes used in communication? Because memes are tenacious, flexible, and contagious, they are considered potent influencing tools. They employ slang, have a mixed textural structure with photos or video snippets, and their message is flexible. Owing to the messages' ambiguity, subjectivity, and interpretative quality, social media algorithms find it extremely difficult to recognize and counteract them, which makes them propagate swiftly. (Fischer & Snyder, 2021). Moreover, humour has been a great tool against oppression for a long time. (Kulkarni, 2017).

Pech (2003) focuses on, why some memes are more successful than others. Three different factors were selected to fit the thesis to determine why other memes have greater success than others.

1. Replication power: De Jong (2008) posits that every meme's success is linked to the influence of the person spreading it. Successful memes reproduce more, mirroring genetic adaptation.
2. Content and message: Pech (2003) proposes that messages and content in memes that align with human brain hardwiring resonate the most, especially regarding language and learning.
3. Meme's ability to meet the needs: For example, nowadays, memes that support political or religious viewpoints that are deemed acceptable in a certain area give power and influence to particular groups, guaranteeing the success of the meme as well as the people who use it (Pech, 2003.)

3.3.1 Influence of different meme genres

This chapter explores meme genres and how they affect audience perceptions, behaviour, and cultural trends differently. Examining the many effects these digital phenomena have on our online communities, emotional reactions, and social interactions will help clarify the wider ramifications of meme culture in the digital age. The influence of meme genres will be researched through media effects theory (Valkenburg et al., 2016). There are five different features of how genres are approached:

1. *Selectivity of media use.*

Individuals choose media content that aligns with their interests, beliefs, and psychological needs. (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). People tend to only choose messages that they believe could influence them. (Rubin, 2009). In addition, a critical feature of memes is that individuals usually prefer content that slightly deviates from their understanding schemas connected to age. (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001.)

2. *Media properties as predictors.*

How different characteristics of media influence the audience. Can be divided into three types of media properties: "modality (e.g., text, auditory, visual, audiovisual), content properties (e.g., violence, fearfulness, type of character, argument strength), and structural properties (e.g., special effects, pace, visual surprises)" (Valkenburg et al., 2016, p.322). In the digital era, differential effects have shifted, for example, to interfaces, and how they influence engagement and information processing differently. (Sundar & Sundar, 2015)

3. *Media effects are indirect.*

According to the idea of media impacts, most media effects are indirect and occur through intermediary factors. This covers elements that occur before media usage (such as dispositions and development), processes that occur during media exposure (such as emotional and cognitive reactions), and results that occur after media exposure (such as attitudes and beliefs). Gaining an understanding of these mediators improves the efficacy of treatments and aids in explaining the how and why of media impacts. According to research, certain beliefs and attitudes developed because of media exposure frequently act as a media filter on the impact of media on behaviour and attitudes (Valkenburg et al., 2016).

4. Media effects are conditional.

Media effects vary between individuals due to their differences and social variables in the social context. (Valkenburg et al., 2016). These differences could include age, race, gender, or class. (Kim, 2004). In essence, a person's traits and surroundings can influence how they respond to media information. An individual's degree of violence, for instance, may have an impact on how they interpret violent media.(Valkenburg et al., 2016.)

5. Media effects are transactional.

Media content not only influences the individuals, but individuals' characteristics and behaviours can also influence their media use and interpretation. Media consumption and its impacts can constantly affect one another because of the dynamic interconnection between media usage and its results. This phenomenon is known as a reinforcing spiral. (Valkenburg et al., 2016.) For instance, if someone often watches media that supports their political views, this may serve to further solidify those views by encouraging the person to seek out more of the same in the future.

Every aspect of the media effects theory could be included with the level of effectiveness; low, moderate, and strong.

Low: The effect is evident, but it is limited by certain conditions or contexts. The effect influences the audience, but its impact is not consistent or depended on specific circumstances. For example, a meme about physics where academic jargon is used, it has a low impact outside due to its specialised content.

Moderate: Effect has a noticeable impact, but it is not as direct or strong as in the cases where the effect is strongly affected. This implies that the effects are notable but tied to other occasions or factors. For example, a meme about international sports final, but it loses its impact as soon as the event is done.

Strong: This effect has a significant and clear impact on how the audience interacts with and is influenced by the memes. For example, a meme expressing frustration about inflation and rising costs of living. Broadly discussed topic about economics across different platforms.

Below is presented the media effects theory with all 9 meme genres by Shifman (2014).

Table 5 Analysis of media effects theory across meme genres.

Meme genre	Selectivity of media use	Media properties as predictors	Media effects are indirect	Media effects are conditional	Media effects are transactional
Reaction Photoshop	Frequently chosen according to personal tastes or the topic of discussion. Chosen because it captures their feelings about a circumstance in a humorous or truthful way.	The quality, originality, and recognizability of the subject may affect their spreadability and popularity.	Indirect effects such as influence through a series of reactions. Could first alter the mood of the viewer, encouraging them to spread the meme.	The effects vary greatly according to the viewer's background and familiarity with the subject. Can be hilarious to other demographics but not to others.	Creators may inspire new creators, and feedback from the audience may influence future designs.
Photo Fads	People may choose to participate in photo fads according to their current social media status.	The simplicity of participation and visual appeal can predict the spread and influence of the meme.	Photo fads may create social bonding, which may even create real-world meetings.	Fads depend heavily on an individual's context, such as a sense of humour or willingness to attend.	People contribute to the trend and create their own versions. This evolves the trend and differs in its direction and nature.
Flash mob	People choose the Flash mobs they watch or participate in mostly based on their own interests.	The popularity of flash mobs depends on the originality, location, and activity of the mob.	The indirect effects of flash mobs are focused on social participation. It creates social nodding between people, participating individuals, and viewers.	The effects of flash mobs depend vastly on individuals' predispositions toward public performances.	Can be influenced by public response, and the experience of taking part in or seeing one can change participants' attitudes and actions.
Lip-sync / Lip dub	Musical preferences play a significant role in the influence of lip-syncs.	The popularity of the song and the performers' creativity, charisma, and enthusiasm	Lip sync videos impact amusement. They may influence how songs or musicians are viewed	The impact of the lip-syncs is heavily related to the viewer's relationship with the	Feedback from the audience may inspire more content and even influence the perceived meaning

		may impact the performance.	culturally, encourage others to express themselves in similar ways.	performers or the song.	of the original song.
Misheard Lyrics	People tend to seek misheard lyrics from familiar songs or simply stumble upon them while scrolling through similar content.	The popularity of the original music, inventiveness and comedy of the misheard lyrics, and their relatability are the main factors that determine popularity.	Misheard lyrics may change the entire song for the listener, usually by adding a layer of humour. This may affect listeners' mood or how they associate the song later.	The impact depends on the individual's knowledge of the original song lyrics, sense of humour and cultural context.	The creation and sharing of misheard lyrics involve a transactional relationship between content creators and viewers.
Recut Trailers	People may seek out trailers from their favourite movies that are presented in different genres or tones.	The popularity depends on the original films' recognizability, quality of the edit, and cleverness.	May influence the perceptions of the original film and lead to discussion of its themes, narratives, and characters.	The effect depends vastly on their relationship with the original film and the film genre. Some individuals may appreciate the humour in the trailer, whereas others prefer the original tone	Trailers create connections among creators, viewers, and cinematic culture.
LOLcats	Seeking LOLcats is usually for amusement. It is a type of humour that people seek.	Humour, cuteness, and relatability of captions in images determine the vitality of memes. Photos are simple and recognizable, which makes them easy to be spread.	Exposure to LOLcats usually affects the viewer's mood, usually by bridging humour or joy.	The impact depends on individuals' humour preferences, affinity for animals or engagement with internet culture.	Evolved through a transactional process that involves producers, watchers, and the larger meme community.
Stock Character Macros	Users are usually drawn to stock character macros because of their relatable humour and simplicity. People often resonate with the characters in memes.	Success is tied to the recognizability of the characters and situations.	The memes might affect people's biases toward the people or the actions in the memes.	The impact is dependent on the user's social setting, cultural background, and personal experiences. The same meme may have different	Memes create relationships between the creator and viewer. The feedback will affect the future development of memes.

				meanings for different audiences.	
Rage Comics	Individuals usually seek rage comics because of their humorous nature.	The appeal lies in their expressive faces and relatable scenarios. The way these memes can capture complex expressions simply makes them appealing and shareable.	Rage comics may affect how people express their frustration feelings in daily life.	Viewers that are more receptive to the comedy and emotional style of rage comics are probably going to connect with the material on a deeper level.	Interactions between creators, viewers, and the wider digital community create new comics, and the feedback evolves the current memes.

Various meme genres discussed in the table have distinct influences on the audience. Reaction photoshops engage the viewer through the alternation of images, creating humorous remakes of viral photos, prompting active engagement and shared amusement. Photo fads and Flash mobs foster a sense of community and shared experience through collective participation. Influence of Lip-syncs and Misheard Lyrics through humorous reinterpretation of songs and other audio-visual content recut trailers usually offer satirical take that often generates discussion and amusement for the audience. LOLcats and Stock character macros are often shared and liked because of their simplicity and humour. Rage comics' ability to capture exaggerated expressions simply makes them relatable and easily shareable. These diverse genres showcase the versatile impact of memes, from community building to entertainment and social commentary.

After dividing memes' different effects on people according to the media effects theory, memes are divided into emotional and knowledge-based genres to determine which are more influential.

Table 6 Meme genres and audience engagement: emotional vs. knowledge-based appeals.

Emotional based	Knowledge-based	Both
Flash Mob Evokes emotions through public performances and social participation.	**Misheard Lyrics** Requires knowledge of the original song. On the other hand, non-native speakers may mishear them originally, then forward the meme to native speakers, and a meme is created.	**Lip-sync/Lip dub** Engaging the audience emotionally through music and performance. **(Emotional)** Specific song choice may influence the audience's cultural and musical knowledge. **(Knowledge)**
LOLCats Evoke humour and joy through cute images and humorous captions.	**Photo Fads** Encouraging people to participate through knowledge of memes and social status.	**Reaction Photoshops** The primary appeal lies in the humorous and creative images, which emotionally engage the audience. **(Emotional)** Viewers can relate to a specific situation or environment in the photo. **(Knowledge)**
Rage Comics Evokes reactions with exaggerated expressions of emotions in relatable scenarios.	**Recut trailers** Engaging viewers cognitively as they reassess the original film's narrative and themes.	N/A
Stock Character Macros Evoke different emotional reactions based on relatable citations and characters.	N / A	N / A

In conclusion, the analysis of emotional- and knowledge-based meme genres in both ways of influencing the audience is evenly distributed. Genres that are emotionally based are usually influenced by humour and personal preferences. On the other hand, knowledge-based genres are largely based on knowledge of the themes presented in the memes, for example, the songs or environments in which the memes are represented. In addition, some genres share elements of both emotional and knowledge.

3.3.2 Satire within political memes

Satire stands at the core of memes, especially in memes connected to the political environment, described as "memes today are a visual archive of political debates and culture wars" (Pian, 2022, p.1). Satire has a long history, ranging from ancient Greek plays and Roman festivals to modern-day memes, and has been expressed in various forms such as pamphlets, novels, poetry, films, cartoons, and music. It

has always been a medium for comedy, critically criticizing cultural standards and politics throughout history. (Pian, 2022)

Political satire is designed to cause laughter while judging existing politics. Satire employs juxtaposition to critique existing political narratives by contrasting flawed realities with ideal visions. It highlights absurdities, making them evident to the audience. (Pian, 2022.) Satire is often defined as a form of criticism that is achieved through ridicule, judgement, and aggression. It employs techniques such as absurdity and distortion to expose the gaps between reality and ideals. (Park-Ozee, 2019.) In this research, satire will be defined as Park-Ozee (2019) widely defines it, because it is burdensome to define the concept of satire.

3.4   Meme lifecycle

To explore the dynamic journey of memes from inception to widespread impact, this chapter delves into the 'meme lifecycle'. It is said that memes can be compared with parasites, because of their similar lifecycles. Both have; transmission, infection and spread phases. Both are seeking potential hosts (Bjarneskans, et al., 1999).

During the initial phase of meme transmission, the meme is encoded within a vector, that serves as a conduit for its dissemination. In this context, the vector is a carrier which transmits the meme. This includes various forms of communication such as text, images, spoken messages, emails, observed behaviours, and even physical objects such a slab of stone. (Bjarneskans, et al., 1999). Dawkins (1976) posits that memes have three qualities for high survival value: longevity, fecundity, and copying fidelity. From these qualities, longevity and copying-fidelity play the biggest roles in the transmission phase.

After transmission, the reproduction ability is evaluated. The degree to which a meme may be duplicated in many media formats is closely correlated with its success in spreading. Memes with strong duplicability score higher on the fitness scale. Radio and the internet are two examples of broadcast media that work exceptionally well at spreading memes. Memes from broadcasters spread extensively with little listener input on radio, a one-to-many medium. In contrast, the many-to-many nature of the internet allows for a larger range of memes from many sources. Examples of this type of meme's widespread adoption and persistence are workplace humour photocopying (also known as "xeroxlore"), for example "You don't have to be insane to work here, but it helps" and other viral internet spams (Bjarneskans et al., 1999, p.132).

As mentioned above the copying fidelity plays a significant role in transmitting memes. Since memes can be seen as parasites, evolution can also destroy or

degrade them. This means that memes must be copied quite precisely to preserve their meaning and message. To preserve the meaning of some memes are forbidden to alternate, for example chain letter etc. (Bjarneskans, et al., 1999.)

During the transmission phase of memes, various mechanisms ensure their replication and survival. Simplicity in design reduces mutation rates, ensuring that memes are less likely to change during replication. Repetition helps in the accurate transmission of complex memes. The durability of the medium, from books to spoken words, affects a meme's longevity and mutation likelihood. Memes that adapt across multiple vectors (abstractability) can spread more widely but are prone to change (Bjarneskans, et al., 1999.) These elements together determine a meme's effectiveness in transmission.

In memetics, decoding refers to the interpretation and mental replication of a meme by a possible host. This process—which is frequently unconscious—is essential to the meme's infection stage. The meme must be able to be seen and understood by the host, and it must fit in with their schemata—preexisting knowledge—for infection to be effective. Memes that are visually striking or emotionally compelling have a higher chance of infecting the host. Furthermore, pro-, and contra-memes inside bigger meme-complexes can help or inhibit the meme's absorption by the host, which can affect the meme's survival and dissemination (Bjarneskans, et al., 1999.)

When a meme is successfully decoded during its infection phase, it integrates into the host's mind. Memes only need a host to remember them; those who change their behaviour because of them are actively infected. The degree to which the meme aligns with the host's preexisting views determines its success. A meme may combine rewards and threats to be spread. Assimilation into preexisting ideas, promotion of active cognition about the meme, and employing external memory aids are some of the strategies that determine how long a meme stays in a host. The length of the infection affects how quickly it spreads and mutates (Bjarneskans, et al., 1999.)

A meme must successfully reproduce and infect a wide variety of hosts to succeed. The meme to be spread needs a "hook"; which is a trait of the meme that makes it interesting and the launch for the host to spread the meme. Feedback from other hosts also impact the spread, either directly or indirectly encouraging or discouraging more distribution. A meme's ideal vector strikes a compromise between minimum mutation and reproducibility, which enables it to adapt to many media, as seen in the shift from analog to digital platforms. However, this flexibility raises the possibility of mutation, which puts the meme's survival in danger (Bjarneskans, et al., 1999.)

A meme must successfully complete its lifecycle several times with as few alterations as possible, unless as in the case of urban legends, mutation is an essential

part of the meme's essence. The meme perishes if this cycle is not completed. (Bjarneskans, et al., 1999.)

(Germanchuk et al., 2021) focused on the meme lifecycle and the birth and death of the meme. "The life cycle for an IM (internet meme) comprises the moment of its appearance, its spread dynamics, loss of relevance, and eventually the end of use" (Germanchuk et al., 2021, p.114). The appearance of a meme can be tricky to trace, since there could be even years of difference from its first appearance to the moment it has become viral. Usually in the internet context a quantitative characteristic for meme to become viral is the number of likes or reposts it gains, for example, on internet forum or a website. Second, the spread of memes defines a lot for the length of its lifecycle. If it's not spread widely, it won't be most likely to be relevant for too long. Loss of relevance refers to the point at which the meme begins to decline in popularity and is no longer widely shared or discussed. Finally, the end of use is the final stage in the meme's life cycle, when it is no longer actively used or shared by internet users. (Germanchuk et al., 2021)

3.5   Memetic warfare

After discussing memes in general, this section explores "memetic warfare," warfare area in which memes go beyond their function as cultural relics to become useful tactical instruments in the armoury of contemporary information warfare.

Before internet memes became a thing, cartoons were the way to spread propaganda and disinformation through images (Peters & Allan, 2022). Internet memes are the "leaflet" of the digital era, flying around and persuading people's opinions (Nieubuurt, 2021). The debate over "real" vs "fake" news has heated up recently, with several visual media outlets being held accountable for distorting the truth (Peters & Allan, 2022).

Hancock (2010) was one of the first authors to examine memetic warfare. He posits "The principle of memetic warfare is to displace or overwrite dangerous pathogenic memes with more benign memes"(Hancock, 2010, p.43). With these new memes the end goal is to make them a new norm and replace old harmful memes with benign memes. The aspect of internet memes in warfare will be discussed later in this chapter. DeCook (2018) posits that memes have become a great tool for spreading propaganda, and how easily they can be used in spreading ideology and culture, even among political movements.

When discussing internet memes in terms of memetic warfare, which will be the focus of this thesis, Giesea (2016) emphasises that aggressive communication strategies such as memes and trolls are considered necessary, affordable, and

simple ways to degrade the reputation and attractiveness of opponents in the social media sphere. Memetic warfare is even referred to as guerrilla warfare, in which memes are seen as propaganda currency. Memetic warfare has not yet been completely incorporated into modern military tactics, despite its potential. Considering its cost-effectiveness and relevance in the changing context of modern conflict, its integration into conventional military thought is vital. Memetic warfare is a continuous battle over narrative, social control, and ideas. It could be thought as an informational operation tailored to social media platforms. In addition memetic warfare could be described as " 'digital native' version of psychological warfare, more commonly known as propaganda"(Giesea, 2016, p.69). Memetic warfare according to Giesea (2016), is a very versatile form of warfare because it can be deployed as defensive, offensive, or predictive weapon in hybrid, conventional, or cyber efforts. Merrin (2019) also describes memetic warfare as "extension of informational war and pysops". (Merrin, 2019, p.219)

A wide range of institutions, including governments, armed forces, official and informal groupings, and proactive individuals and collectives, strategically use memetic warfare. (Merrin, 2019) points out that it is only used in domestic politics. In this article, memetic warfare is defined as an area in which it also affects foreign affairs. Memetic warfare is part of 'troll-politics'. Troll-politics differ from normal trolling, because it is serious, and it has its end-goal to affect politics in one way or another through memes. (Merrin, 2019.)

Gray (2021) takes the same approach to the concept of memetic narrative as Gisea (2016). Gray proposes that memetic warfare is a type of information warfare in which propaganda is used to sway public opinion to achieve political objectives. Although this tactic is not new, its efficacy and reach have altered dramatically due to the increasing use of the Internet. It is argued that memetic narratives, although frequently perceived as a weapon for manipulation by hostile states, pose a greater threat to internal dissension inside a state by influencing both its public and governing bodies.

Memetic warfare, also known as the weaponization of memes, is the practice of creating memes to incite "us versus them" scenarios or to cast doubt on the veracity of news reports from mainstream sources. This deliberate use of memes subverts conventional media narratives and advances certain agendas by drawing a distinction between in-groups "us" and out-groups "them". (Peters & Allan, 2022.)

Memetic warfare marks a significant change in the way stories and ideas are spread and challenged. It evolved from conventional propaganda through cartoons to online memes in the digital age. This type of warfare efficiently creates "us versus them" scenarios and challenges conventional media narratives by using the viral nature of memes to sway public opinion and affect political debate.

3.6   Ethical reflection on memes

This chapter delves into the ethical dimensions of meme culture, examining the complex interplay between humour and social commentary and the possible potential of harm. Memes often tread a fine line between humour/satire and insensitivity, which raises many ethical questions. The ethical reflection of memes will be explored using the TARES test as a guiding framework.

The TARES test is divided into five different principles for ethical persuasion:

1. **Truthfulness of the message.**
   Focuses on a message that must not only be true but also truthful. The principle of truthfulness demands that the persuader's intention is not to deceive the persuadees. (Baker & Martinson, 2001)
2. **Authenticity of the persuader.**
   The persuader truly endorses and stands behind the message. It is about advocating sincerely and with personal conviction, ensuring that the message aligns with one's values and principles. (Baker & Martinson, 2001)
3. **Respect for the persuadee.**
   For the message to be ethical, the persuader must respect the persuadee. The target audience must be respected, and their rights, interests and well-being must not be violated. (Baker & Martinson, 2001)
4. **Equity of the appeal.**
   Persuaders must use their power of persuasion fairly. They cannot manipulate or deceit the audience. It requires parity between the persuader and the persuade in terms of information and understanding. Vulnerable groups should not be unfairly targeted, and appeals should be understandable in terms of context and underlying motivations. (Baker & Martinson, 2001)
5. **Social responsibility for the common good.**
   In communication, persuaders to consider the broader public interest or overall effects on a larger social scale. It prioritizes community welfare over self-interest or profit. Persuaders should promote, products, ideas or causes that are beneficial to society and should not persuade anything which could harm individuals within society. (Baker & Martinson, 2001)

In the next table, these principles will be applied to memes, first showing the expectations that memes should fulfil and then discussing whether those expectations are fulfilled.

Table 7 Evaluation of NAFO memes according to the TARES-test.

	How memes should be created and shared according to TARES ethical standards	Assessment of Memes in relation to the TARES ethical standards
Truthfulness of the message	Memes should be based on facts and not just intentionally deceptive. False information should not be masked as the truth.	Memes usually thrive on the exaggeration and satire of subjects, which may blur the line between reality and fiction.
Authenticity of the persuader	Creators of memes should genuinely believe in the content they create. Creation of memes should be based on sincerity and integrity.	Memes are often created spontaneously and reflect genuine sentiments of humour, which reflects the authenticity of the creator.
Respect for the persuadee	Memes should respect the entire audience's dignity and rights. Memes should not harm any individual or group.	Memes often push the boundaries of humour, which can be disrespectful or offensive to some audiences.
Equity of the appeal	Creation and sharing of memes should consider fairness to the audience. This includes ensuring that vulnerable groups are not exploited and that memes are not used unfairly to influence or manipulate viewers.	Because memes have diverse and global reach, ensuring equity can be complex.
Social responsibility for the common good	Memes should contribute positively to society by promoting common good, rather than causing harm, hate or division.	In the meme culture humour and virality is prioritized, and it can be problematic to uphold.

As can be seen from the table, memes lack the concept of ethical standards. Since memes goal is to influence people through humour and satire, respect and social responsibility are receiving less attention. However, creators of memes usually are authentic and believe in the content they create because they usually present their own opinions or viewpoints to the subject. In the case of memes, to improve ethics is to focus more on the audience, in addition to the target audience, to produce memes that serve a wider group of individuals and groups without harming the with exaggerated or disrespectful content.

4   DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The upcoming chapter will detail the research data, methodology employed and, methods of analysis. Data will be sourced from the @Official-NAFO X-account, for which authorization has been granted. The scope of the data will be further delineated in subsequent sections. Analysis will be conducted via content analysis, assessing various elements within the memes. Once these elements are interpreted, the data will be organized thematically into distinct categories for a comprehensive examination.

4.1   Qualitative research and research question

This study employs qualitative research to delve deeper into the thematic content of memes and their ways to influence people within geopolitical conflict situation. The essence of qualitative research lies in its focus on understanding behaviours, analysing events, and providing theoretical insights. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Similarly, Hirsjärvi et. al. (2009) posit that qualitative research describes natural and real events and the people involved in them. The objective of qualitative research is to study the subject as comprehensively as possible. Qualitative research aims not to validate predetermined theories but to explore and reveal new insights. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009.) This approach aligns ideally with the objectives of this study, as it enables the identification of new themes or elements that memes use to spread a satirical narrative of the conflict.

This study examines the themes in memes that create a narrative for satirizing the geopolitical conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The case study in this research analyses Twitter user @Official_NAFO's NAFO memes about countering Russian propaganda in the Russia– Ukraine conflict. Content analysis will be conducted to reveal the different themes and elements in the NAFO-memes that create the narrative. After the analysis, all the data will be thematized and separated into different groups. This research deepens knowledge on the use of memes in digital environments and conflict situations. The research will be based on the following research question:

RQ1: What are the influence mechanisms utilized in NAFO memes?

4.2   Research context

The conflict occurring in eastern Europe between Russia and Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea to Russia (Braun et al., 2023). The conflict took a vast step to worsen when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022 (Rakityanskaya, 2023), which created many organizations and individuals to stand up for Ukraine, which was clearly outnumbered in the conflict.

One such group is the Nordic Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), an online collective formed in May 2022. NAFO should not be mixed up with NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), NAFO is its own organization. There is no official connection between NAFO and NATO, NAFO is just a playful riff on NATO. NAFO originated from an initiative by Twitter user @Kama_Kamilia, who exchanged custom "fella" profile pictures for donations in support of Ukraine (North Atlantic Fella Organization, 2024). (*North Atlantic Fella Organization*, 2024.) NAFO is a collective online group supporting Ukraine and fighting against Russia in informative warfare.

The movement is driven by a collective effort to support Ukraine during its conflict with Russia. With members known as "Fellas" fighting back against Russian misinformation online. (Rakityanskaya, 2023). NAFO is supporting various fundraising efforts, and the campaign immediately gained momentum on Twitter. NAFO's Fellas, the Shiba Inu 'doge' meme, are the doges edited into different situations connected to the conflict, or to the reactions to the conflict. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization*, 2024.) The doge meme went viral from a blog post, and after that in Reddit of another Shiba Inu with misspelling of 'dog' as 'doge' (Meikle & Esteves, 2015). Doge became a cultural icon in 2014 and became so recognized that even corporations used it in their advertising. (Bury, 2016). Below is an example of a NAFO meme from the @Official_NAFO X account (See figure 1).

Figure 1. Picture of a 'Fella' in television with the text "SUFFER". (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

4.3 Content analysis and thematic analysis

Since memes are visual discourses and represent different situations through visuality content analysis, a method well-suited for analysing visual images (Rose, 2016), directly supports the research question. Content analysis enables the objective examination of visual data, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of media content. The analysis will break down the content to identify both differences and similarities.

In the analysis phase, each image is meticulously examined, and then key themes and elements are coded and thematized. Memes will be analysed in chronological order. This procedure demands that one pay close attention to the nuances, paradoxes, and intricacies that are present in the images. The aim is to identify the diverse elements that are expressed through these pictures. Upon completion of the coding process, the codes will be quantitatively assessed and presented. (Rose, 2016.) To apply content analysis in the study every photo from the @Official_NAFO X account will be closely examined, and all the elements and tools from the images will be coded and analysed. All memes are studied separately and highlight every element and aspect that creates them.

After the memes are analysed, they are reviewed as a whole and connections between each image are found. After the elements of memes are collected and coded, they are categorized and thematized. Clarke & Braun (2017) defined thematic analysis as a method for "identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017 p. 297). Thematic analysis is a method for generating data and codes from qualitative data.

With the help of thematic analysis, it is possible to identify features, not all, from the data with the guidance of the research questions. The research question may evolve as the study progresses, allowing for a responsive approach to emerging data. (Clarke & Braun, 2017)

Content and thematic analysis are particularly well suited to analysing the satirical layers of NAFO memes, which directly answers the research question. Content analysis allows for the systematic examination of visual and textual elements, as noted by Rose (2016), which are instrumental in portraying the satirical depiction of geopolitical dynamics within the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Furthermore, thematic analysis allows identification and interpretation of recurring motives and narratives that reveal the underlying strategies used by NAFO to criticise, mockery, or support certain geopolitical positions. This dual-faceted methodological approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of how NAFO memes function as tools for complex political commentary.

Figure 2. BEST PROPAGANDA MONEY CAN BUY- meme. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

4.4   Data collection

Data were obtained exclusively from the @Official_NAFO Twitter account. Only Twitter/X was used because it is the biggest and most followed platform on which NAFO is sharing content. 20 Memes were chosen in the order newest to oldest (10.4.2024). Focusing on 20 memes enabled a thorough examination of meme nuances, ensuring a rich and detailed understanding of the memes and the narratives at play.

Only memes published in 2023 and January 2024 were used in this study. Using this timeline guaranteed that the study considered the most recent and pertinent discourses within a given geopolitical situation. It offered a consistent period of investigation, guaranteeing comparative consistency. Moreover, restricting the analysis to a single year's worth of data helped to keep things manageable and enabled a thorough analysis, now and for future research. This time limitation in the data is crucial for encapsulating the most recent advancements in the conversation, specifically considering any noteworthy changes that transpired in 2023.

Only memes including the 'Fella' Shiba Inu dog were chosen for the analysis. It allowed concentration on how an iconic meme communicates and influences discourse and audience. The Shiba Inu meme is central to NAFO's identity and message and plays a vital role in their actions and communication, since the photoshopped Shiba Inu dog is the beginning of the organization. Using only Fella-memes ensured that the true narrative of NAFO's meme was captured. In addition, only memes that include text allow a more in-depth analysis of how memes create narratives that fight Russian propaganda. Including both images and text provided a crucial understanding of the full scope of these memes' communicative strategies and their impact. Both text and images delivered a greater overall image of the narrative and discourse presented on the organization's X page.

The data excluded the meme's advertising of NAFO events, new NAFO members joining the Fella organization, organization information about new fundraising events, or other fundraising information. Memes posted only by the @NAFO_Official account were analysed and used in the research. Memes excluded from this research, such as those promoting events or representing other organizations, are considered outside the study's scope, focusing solely on NAFO's narrative. This ensures that the analysis remains concentrated on NAFO's unique contributions to the discourse.

Figure 3 All memes analysed in the study.

5   RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the results of the study, focusing on the influence mechanisms NAFO memes used within geopolitical discourse. 20 NAFO were analysed to get comprehensive analysis on what are the influence mechanisms used in them. Drawing from qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis of the selected memes. The results illuminated the mechanism used in the NAFO memes. The analysis further explored the elements found in the thematic analysis, clarifying the underlying stories and their effects on digital communication in conflict situations.

As (Shifman, 2014) emphasised internet memes share three common characteristics; content, stance, and form. NAFO memes always shared the same content and ideology, as they revolved around geopolitical conflict, particularly focusing on the Russia- Ukraine conflict. Memes also often used the same influence mechanism, for example, satire and absurdity. The stance of NAFO memes in this study was to support Ukraine and mock Russia. This stance reflected the collective attitude of the community that created and distributed memes as a form of digital activism. NAFO memes included recognizable visual elements as the 'Fella' character and textual appearance with harsh language with intertextuality to other memes such as "based" and "cringe". This consistent use of recognizable elements created a sense of cohesion and identity that made them easily attributable to their audience.

Figure 4. Examples of NAFO memes. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

5.1   Themes in NAFO memes

The comprehensive analysis revealed five distinct themes from the 20 memes, encapsulating all identified elements within the memes, which are presented in the table below with the frequency of occurrence and description of the themes. The final themes were satire, digital culture, absurdity, meme intertextuality, and

visuals. It is common for a single meme to encompass several themes, as many embodied a diverse array of concepts simultaneously.

Table 8. Distribution of themes in the data.

Theme	N / %	Description of the theme
Meme intertextuality	19 / 95%	Memes that included references to meme-specific language or other memes.
Visuals	19/ 95%	Focusing on the nuances of meme editing, such as the use of dark themes, bold and simple design, and sloppy editing, and how these contributed to the shareability and influence overall memes.
Absurdity	16 / 80%	Memes that used humour and absurdity address serious topics such as international conflict and warfare.
Digital culture	14 / 70%	Memes that reflected commentary on internet behaviour and online discourse.
Satire	11 / 55%	Satirical commentary on geopolitical tensions in the Russia– Ukraine conflict.

In the following chapters are examples from the memes that best illustrated each theme, ensuring a clear link between the meme content and the thematic categorization.

5.1.1 Meme intertextuality

Intertextuality refers to any absorption and transformation of another concept (Martin, 2011). *Meme intertextuality* is when the memes are referred to other popular memes on internet. The *meme intertextuality* seen in this meme is mostly from the intertextuality of playing with the popular "I have two wolves inside me"-meme (See figure 5). The original meme presented two wolves representing good and bad within a person. By replacing the wolves with two Shiba Inu memes, original narrative was altered while maintaining the original meaning of the meme. In addition, the Shiba Inus created a strong connection to meme culture because of their identifiability.

Figure 5. Altered meme of the two wolves inside me, meme. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

On the other meme, Shiba Inu's head was edited from the headmaster Skinner's head by Simpson (See figure 6). Meme was used for multiple purposes, referring to people being disappointed by other people, and the text "pathetic" is frequently used in humorous or exaggerated ways. *Meme intertextuality* in this meme was shown using Shiba Inu, the use of other memes, and the use of a tone often used in meme language.

Figure 6. Meme where 'Fella's head is replaced onto human head. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

Meme intertextuality was observed in 19 of the chosen memes in the data. Memes that achieved widespread recognition and sharing often possessed a high degree of reproducibility, as noted by Bjarneskans et al. (1999). In addition, internet-

specific language was investigated and chosen in this theme. If a specific language is used in the memes, which might require knowledge of different memes, it could increase the connection between the audience and the creator of the meme because of the "inside joke".

5.1.2 Visuals

Visuals in this study refers to editing of the pictures, with photo editing software (Swerzenski, 2021). *Visuals* were built through sloppy editing and simplicity. Most NAFO memes were edited in the same way, harsh, simple, and focused on the text in the meme. With this editing style, the focus was on the message of the meme, not on the nuances of visual appearance. With these elements, memes were made understandable and engaging if the context is familiar. In the meme below, the editing was harsh and not too well-groomed (See figure 7).
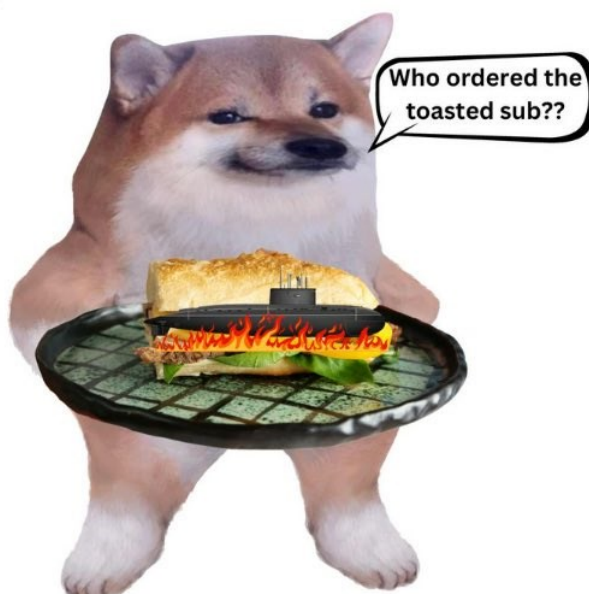
Figure 7. Meme where 'Fella' is holding a subway that is filled with a subway.
(*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

Visuals are a vital element of internet memes. It was seen in 19 of 20 memes in data collected. In NAFO memes, the most used element in the editorial techniques was to create over simplified images to highlight and emphasise the text and elements that wanted to be seen. In some photos, the edits were even a bit clumsy or sloppy to create an image where NAFO really is just a group of Doges fighting against Russia, and how even they could beat them in informational warfare. Increased absurdity through editorial and visual elements.

5.1.3 Absurdity

Absurdity is "both lost cause and ridiculous to boot" (Wein, 2023, p.1087) In this study it refers to humorous absurdity, something is so absurd that is it humorous. *Absurdity* was illustrated in multiple ways in this meme (See figure 8). Absurdity is a great tool for influencing because of its ability to break from conventional logic or reasoning, for example with surprise element. Also, the humorous nature engaged people to share content that spark a strong reaction. Shiba Inu's dog was edited into a military figure, which created an absurd and irrelevant figure because of the contrast between military and violence with a light-hearted dog. Text added to the firearm again created a juxtaposition between the text and the image; it is a playful and humorous quotation inserted into a serious combat situation.

Figure 8. Meme of a 'Fella' using a bazooka with words as ammunition. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

The *absurdity* of this NAFO meme was evident through the combination of a serious courtroom setup with the comical addition of a Shiba Inu dog's head edited as the judge's head (See figure 9). In addition, the Shiba Inu were given glasses to enhance the silly and surreal nature of the image. Use of the internet slang words "cringe" and "based", which are purposefully incongruous in the courtroom setting. Meme humorously subverted the gravity of a court's judgment with a light-hearted and slang filled decree, which would never been used in such a situation.

Figure 9. Meme where 'Fella' is acting as a judge. (*North Atlantic Fella Organiza tion (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

Absurdity was seen in 16 of 20 memes. Since one of the delimitations was that 'Fella' doge must be included, and it is already a humorous meme on the internet, it creates humorous value to most of the images. Absurdity within these memes were characterized by the portrayal of conflict thought imagery that represents the conflict as humorous, ludicrous, and ridiculous, which effectively diminished the seriousness of the situation by treating it as a subject of jest.

5.1.4 Digital culture

Digital culture is how digital technology has intertwined with changes in society and individual behaviours (Levin & Mamlok, 2021). *Digital culture* was seen in this meme as a common type of response in text messaging and online interactions (See figure 10). The influence of digital culture within memes resonated with audiences due to its recognizability and its reflection of commonplace digital communication practices. The meme format was also a screenshot of a text message platform, which is pervasive in digital culture and communication. The sender expects a detailed answer to a message but receives this instead. This is a meme itself within digital culture. Shiba Inu's head as an add-on increased the engagement and influence of the meme because of its recognition, the dog was presented as one of us, chatting in social media.
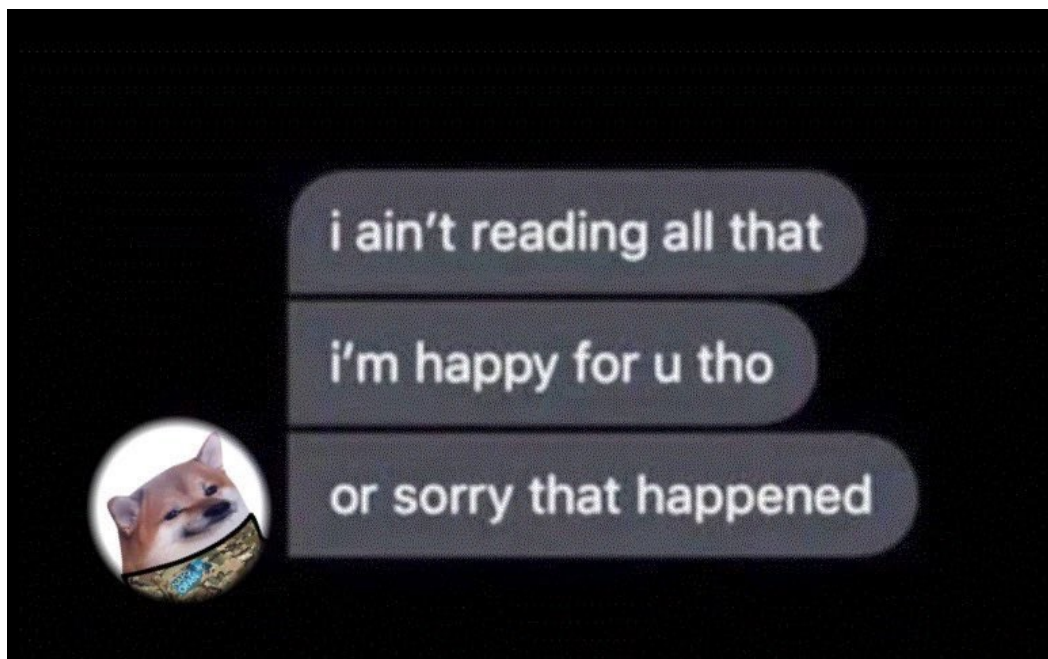
Figure 10. Meme of a screenshot of a messenger app. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

In the photo below, *digital culture* was exemplified by the inclusion of a modern home system interface (See figure 11). Notification presented in the meme is from the iPhone, which connected it more to the digital environment. The 'Fella' was presented as harmless and playful in a kid costume, as it would be asking the homeowner to come out and play with them. These juxtaposed a typically serious security alert with the comedic image of a Shiba Inu dressed as a kid. The meme visualized a common experience in a digital environment where people receive alerts from different applications.

Figure 11. Meme of a 'Fella' standing in front of a doorbell camera. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

In the analysis, the influence of digital culture on communication emerged as a pivotal element in 14 of 20 memes. Given the predominance of the internet as the primary medium for meme dissemination, it's inherent that these memes resonated with, and reflected, the nuances of digital culture and its continual evolution. In these memes digital culture was seen on multiple different digital platforms. Nowadays communication in digital environment is short, harsh, and vigorous. The memes were seen as edited conversations in different environments and digital platforms.

5.1.5 Satire

Satire is a genre which utilizes absurdity and exaggeration to explore and expose the contradictions within political, societal, or economic norms, usually eliciting humour but not necessarily requiring it (Park-Ozee, 2019). *Satire* in the meme was manifested using humour and exaggeration to comment on the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine (See figure 12). Absurd visualization satirized a powerful entity that is defeated by an army of small doges. Russia was presented as a strong boxer in the beginning, and NAFO was presented as a dog wearing a military uniform. The initial setting was a boxer versus a dog, which seemed like an obvious win for the boxer. However, because the meme was satirizing Russia, the boxer is beaten up by a herd of dogs. The satire in this meme was the subversion of expectations: a seemingly superior force (boxer) is met with sudden resistance from a minor adversary (small dog and its allies). Satire was enhanced by the mocking text of an arrogant fighter who cannot beat the doges, regardless of his efforts to stop them.

Figure 12. Meme of a boxer fighting a herd of dogs. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

In the image, satire was portrayed through the juxtaposition of a serious and formal setting with a humorous and absurd element (See figure 13). Mr. Lee was presented as formal and aggressive, while the 'Fella' was presented as laid back and chill. The satirical message was expressed by inserting a fictitious or meme-originated persona participating in a significant government debate or trial. Fellas' appearance in such an environment for serious conversation parodied the formality and gravity of the occasion. This implied a contrast between the serious nature of the occasion and the light-hearted, usually irrelevant meme culture.

Figure 13. Meme of a NAFO representative facing a CIA representative in court. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

Satire was seen in 11 of the 20 memes. While every meme was somehow connected to the conflict, none directly satirized the conflict itself; instead, they approached it from different angles. Satirical commentary in this case referred to the stupidity, exaggeration, or ridicule approach to the conflict, where they mocked Russia. It is often a light-hearted way how NAFO described the ridiculousness of the situation. The 'Fella' character, represented by the image of an innocent dog, was often depicted as standing alone against the might of an entire nation or facing opposition from individuals aligned with the NAFO

organization. Juxtaposition was created by placing the 'Fella' in different conflict situations, creating a stark contrast between the innocence of the sweet dog and the power of the geopolitical situation.

After the thematization of the memes, it can be concluded that NAFO memes served as multifaceted tools for satirical commentary, digital engagement, and communal identity expression among geopolitical tensions. Through these different themes, these memes not only critiqued the Russia– Ukraine conflict but also fostered a unique collective identity among NAFO supporters. The blend of visual simplicity and editorial ingenuity underscored the strategic use of internet memes in shaping public discourse and influencing perception, highlighting the power of digital platforms in contemporary geopolitical narratives.

5.2   HOC analysis in the concept of memes

The memes that NAFO were pursuing and posting on their X (Twitter) account were narratives with different memes. Memes acted as weaponized narratives, a tool for communicative warfare. As the memes were analysed and thematised, the narrative that NAFO was pursuing is satirizing the geopolitical dynamics in the Russia– Ukraine conflict. Next, the different elements of the narrative are analysed through the table presented in Chapter 2.1. In the forthcoming section, an in-depth analysis is conducted on two primary fronts: first, the transformation of the original narrative through the lens of NAFO memes, and second, potential avenues for further modifying these NAFO memes.

Ownership: NAFO memes, essentially created by the community's members known as "Fellas", were primarily propagated through the @NAFO_Official X account. The precise origin of the meme was not clear, reflecting a common characteristic of digital content, where transparency of ownership might be unknown. All the memes in this research were posted by the @NAFO_Official account itself. Even with this ownership ambiguity, the memes used in this research were clearly associated with NAFO's collective identity because they always feature the 'Fella' Shiba Inu dog as the symbol. This communal approach to memes underscored that narratives could be collectively owned and shaped, as the media effects are transcriptional (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Because NAFO memes were usually collectively created and shared through the @NAFO_Official account, clear ownership was lacking, and the level of ownership could be defined as low. In the meme below 'Fella' as main character (See figure 14).

Figure 14. 'Fella' posing on the front cover of Time magazine. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

The original narrative in this case was the information against Ukraine, which could have been obtained from Russian authorities or other sources. By recontextualizing the narrative with memes, NAFO not only claimed ownership over their version of the narrative but also potentially diminished the impact or credibility of the original by subjecting it to ridicule or criticism. From this perspective, the level of ownership was high because of the clear authorship of the original narrative.

Hijackability: Because some memes NAFO is posting were already hijacked narratives from the conflict, hijacking the narrative with memes was effortless. For example, the accusations about the bought propaganda NAFO turned it around and created a meme of themselves chilling in a tube sipping cocktails with the text "BEST PROPAGANDA MONEY CAN BUY" (See figure 15). They took the narrative and turned it upside down. The level of hijackability could be defined as high because of the nature of the memes, where the narrative was easily modified and altered.

Figure 15. BEST PROPAGANDA MONEY CAN BUY- meme. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

The original narratives hijacked by NAFO memes varied widely in their level of hijackability, depending on their source and nature. Considering the narratives that have been hijacked in this research, these narratives could be considered low. These narratives were usually rooted in political or cultural contexts, which strengthened the alteration.

Convertibility: In the case of NAFO memes, the convertibility highly depended on how the meme was converted and what elements were alternated. If the core elements, which in this case was the Fella, were replaced, the entire message or narrative was shuffled. Fellas are the main elements that cannot be changed. However, if the text from the images was alternated, the original narrative could still be preserved with slight changes. Because the narratives in the memes used in this research shared the same narrative, mocking and satirizing the international conflict, slight changes in the text did not change the narrative. However, because memes were easy to alter with changes in the text and imagery, the level of convertibility within NAFO memes could be defined as high.

In the image the content of propaganda has changed, but it still has maintained the core message of influencing public opinion and promoting a particular

narrative (See figure 16). Also, with the twist of the doges the narrative was slightly altered, but the core message was still the same.

Figure 16 Presentation of USSR and Russian propaganda evolution. (*North Atlantic Fella Organization (@Official_NAFO) / X*, 2024)

When assessing convertibility in the original narrative, it was highly altered. Because the narratives in the concept of NAFO memes were usually shared in the form of images, there was a vast change right away. NAFO used a combination of visuals and text to alter the narrative. The text was usually satirized, and images were created to support the text or act as their own elements in the narratives. Original narratives were still rooted in political and cultural contexts. However, because NAFO used imagery and different text modifications to convert the narrative, the narrative was highly converted, and the level could be defined as high. On the other hand, if the narrative had been altered without imagery and text modifications, the narratives' convertibility level could have been defined as low.

Abbott (2008) emphasised the actual event and the discourse, when defining and describing narrative. NAFO memes are a great example on how different narratives can be presented (discourse) differently to alter the original narrative. In this case the original narrative was usually created from Russian information and communication, which has evolved into memes. This created a tension between the represented events (tangible) and the representation of events (Discourse) (Abbott, 2008). This is one way in which NAFO memes influenced the audience,

with the juxtaposition of real occurring events and the representation of the events through memes.

NAFO memes could be associated with public narratives according to (Baker, 2010) division. NAFO memes were usually shared within communities, as in this case in NAFO's X account. These memes were also usually developed within broader social community through interactive relationship between the creator and the audience, transactional media effect (Valkenburg et al., 2016).

5.3   NAFO Memes: A Media Effects Theory Perspective

Media effects theory explores how media influences and shapes today's society. Through this theoretical framework it can be seen how in different ways media affected individuals and groups. Focusing on the media effects theory and its fundamentals, it was seen how NAFO used these dynamics to engage their audience. As shown in Chapter 3.2.1, memes have five different ways of affecting the audience according to the media effects theory. (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Next, the different features were assessed through the NAFO memes and the levels of effectiveness for each aspect were evaluated.

1. *Selectivity of media use.*

Media effects theory suggests that people with keen interest to geopolitical conflicts, or such topics, are more likely to interact with content that aligns with their views. In the case of NAFO memes it was hypothesised, that the increased interaction may manifest as heighted engagement on social media platforms. Because consumption is so selective, it is important that the commentary on the memes resonated with the audience. In addition, previous knowledge of NAFO and the Shiba Inu doge could have increased the engagement of the audience. It could be said that selectivity of media use, strongly influenced the engagement levels with NAFO memes.

2. *Media properties as predictors.*

According to the media effects theory the distinctive characteristics of NAFO memes, such as satirical edge, thematic consistency, and visual and editorial appeal, could have predicted their impact on the audience. The use of clever humour and political commentary enhanced meme's shareability and its potential to engage and influence public discourse. Posited by the theory media properties as predictors could strongly affected the engagement levels with NAFO memes.

3. *Media effects are indirect.*

Drawing on the media effects theory, the influence of NAFO memes often extended beyond their immediate consumption because of the digital environment in which they acted. As memes were shared and interacted with on social media, social media acted as an amplifier. Memes raised from conversations in the digital environment, which created broader engagement through sharing, commenting, and other interactions. Influencers and influential people sharing NAFO memes boosted this effect. This emphasised the complexity of the interplay between platform, content, and audience in the digital age. In the case of NAFO memes, the goal is to spark a larger discussion and affect people and their opinions on the conflict. Owing to their objective of influencing individuals and shaping public opinion, the indirect media effects exerted by NAFO memes are theorised to have had a moderate impact.

4. *Media effects are conditional.*

Guided by the media effects theory the contextual background is recognised as playing a crucial role in shaping the reception and impact of memes. For example, factors such as current geopolitical events, online sentiment, and media coverage are theorised to have effectively altered the effectiveness of memes. In this case, since NAFO usually created memes about recent events occurring in the conflict, it likely created better shareability and overall impact for the memes. Reflecting on these sights it could be said that the conditional media effects had low effect on the engagement levels with NAFO memes.

5. *Media effects are transactional.*

Utilizing insights from media effects theory it is understood that the memes in this research had been shared and interacted with from platform X, NAFO memes were inherently interactive. Such interactions were built with comments, shares, likes, or meme modifications. In addition, comments and other interactions have led to conversations that created more similar memes. This ongoing interaction is theorised to have created a feedback loop, where the community shaped the memes, and the memes reflected the community's sentiment. Drawing on the theory, it could be suggested that transactional media effects had strongly affected the engagement levels with NAFO memes.

The following table categorised the potential impact of memes in different media effects (See table 9). Table illustrated the effects from low to high threat, and each row represents different type of media effect based on the media effects theory explored previously. The visualisation helped to understand how different

contexts and media properties could have influenced the dissemination and re-
ception of memes, highlighting in which condition memes could be harmful.

Table 9 Potential of threat of memes according to media effects theory.

LOW HARM ▲		HIGH HARM ➔
MEDIA EFFECT TYPE	LOW THREAT CONTEXT	MODERATE THREAT CONTEXT	HIGH THREAT CONTEXT
SELECTIVITY OF USE	HIGH USER ALIGNMENT WITH MEME CONTENT	MIXED AUDIENCE WITH VARIED ALIGMENTS	AUDIENCE WIDELY OPPOSED TO MEME CONTENT
MEDIA PROPERTIES	CLEAR, FACTUAL CONTENT	SATIRICAL CONTENT WITH MIXED INTERPRETATIONS	MISLEADING OR FALSE INFORMATION
INDIRECT EFFECTS	LIMITED SHARING WITHIN NICHE GROUPS	WIDESPREAD SHARING WIHTOUH CRITICAL REVIEW	VIRAL SPREAD WITH MISINFORMATION
CONDITIONAL EFFECTS	STABLE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS	POLTICALLY TENSE BUT NON-VOLATILE CONDITIONS	HIGH-TENSION, VOLATILE CONDITIONS
TRANSACTIONAL EFFECTS	ENGAGED WITHIN INFORMED COMMUNITIES	ENGAGEMENT IN SEMI-INFORMED PUBLIC SPACES	ENGAGEMENT IN MISINFORMED OR HOSTILE SPACES

Table 9 illustrated the varying levels of threat with different media effects on
meme engagement. The table categorised the potential threat of the media effects
from low to high harm. In the table all five media effects were evaluated: Selec-
tivity of media use, media properties, indirect effects, conditional effects, and
transactional effects. The table underscored the importance of understanding the
contextual differences in dissemination and reception of the memes. The poten-
tial harm from memes can different significantly vary based on the audience's
alignment with the content, social and political conditions and the clarity and
nature of the memes. Also, the community the memes were shared in affected
the harmfulness.

The transactional relationship between NAFO memes and their audience high-
lighted a behaviour-driven approach to meme dissemination according to
Shifman's (2014) classification. NAFO memes fell into the category of behaviour-
driven memes due to their role in reflecting and influencing specific behaviours

and cultural artifacts within the digital landscape. These memes were inseparable from their expressions, and they were expressing different concrete information units through such elements as commenting, sharing, and remixing. From this perspective, it was possible to conduct an empirical investigation into the ways in which NAFO memes had spread both inside and outside of their community, demonstrating their concrete influence on online conversation and group behaviour.

Pech (2003) provided further insight into the phenomenon, underlining the importance of replication power, content and message, and memes' ability to meet the needs of users. With NAFO, meme *replication power* played a vital role because of the vast spread of memes among individuals and organizations. The replication is further amplified by the community's active engagement with memes. Engagement could be achieved through adapting, sharing, and responding to those memes, which enhanced the visibility and impact beyond the NAFO community. *The content and message* in NAFO memes followed a certain frame with both visuals and text. Cleverly used satire, humour, or other references gained vast traction and spread more widely, both within and beyond the community. *A meme's ability to meet needs* was one of the main reasons for the success of NAFO memes. The political views and statements made with the memes resonated highly with people against the Russian propaganda NAFO is fighting against. These dynamics underscored the role of memes as tools for both social cohesion and the dissemination of ideologies within digital communities.

In this multifaceted approach to digital engagement with memes, memes could also be divided into knowledge-based and emotional-based memes. In this concept, NAFO memes usually fell into the emotional-based meme category because of their influence through satire and humour. At the same time, understanding the meaning behind the memes requires knowledge of the current geopolitical situation and the current events in the conflict. NAFO memes adequately mixed both knowledge-based and emotional-based content, which allowed them to be accessible and more impactful for a broader audience.

5.4   Ethical reflection of NAFO memes

TARES ethical standards by Baker & Martinson (2001) revealed that NAFO memes ventured into the ethical landscape and balance between satire, advocacy, and digital activism. The following table summarized the findings of the TARES assessment on NAFO memes, providing a structured analysis on their ethical implications.

Table 10 Assessment of NAFO memes in relation to the TARES ethical standards.

	Assessment of NAFO Memes in relation to the TARES ethical standards
Truthfulness of the message	NAFO memes often played with satire and humour to communicate their stance, which may lead to exaggeration or parody. This may have led to the oversimplification of complex conflict situations. The truthfulness of memes might vary; some may have been based on factual events, while others might have employed fictional elements to make a point.
Authenticity of the persuader	The creators of the NAFO memes were part of a community that supports Ukraine. Authenticity was derived from genuine will to support Ukraine and fight against misinformation. The collective nature of NAFO may lead to variations in authenticity, but the overreaching goal of supporting Ukraine leaded to authentic intent for communication.
Respect for the persuadee	NAFO memes have been designed for both audiences: supporters who share a common stance on the conflict. and to the people who were against them. It depends on which point of view you investigated the respect, but overall, when talking about memes and humour many people might have found it disrespectful.
Equity of the appeal	NAFO memes were designed to combat pro-Russia narratives and propaganda. Memes amplified diverse perspectives that allowed more voices to be heard about geopolitical conflict. However, because the narratives were about political or geopolitical conflict, they might not have provided equitable representation of all sides involved in the conflict.
Social responsibility for the common good	The overreaching goal of NAFO memes were to support Ukraine, aligning it with a sense of social responsibility by maintaining integrity in public discourse and supporting the nation under assault. However, oversimplification or misleading memes might have risen ethical concerns regarding the responsibility of meme creators. It must be ensured that the content does not inadvertently misinform or harm the audience.

The TARES assessment revealed a complex interplay supporting Ukraine within the boundaries of memes. While the authenticity of the creators is not to be doubted, the truthfulness and respect for the audience can be compromised by the satirical and humorous nature of memes. This raises questions about the ethicality of memes. It must be ensured that the content is not misleading or

disrespectful to the viewers, highlighting the need for careful balance humour and sensitivity in the portrayal of geopolitical conflicts.

5.5   Potential harm of memes

In this section, the potential harm of memes was assessed with the dissemination and interpretation of memes, in this case within the context of NAFO memes. The considered harm was in terms of impact on public discourse and the possible harmful acts that the narrative change might cause. The table below presents evaluation framework, which categorized memes based on the factors of Ownership, Hijackability, Convertibility, and Potential to Harm. These factors were rated at three levels of risk: Low, Moderate, and High.

Table 11 Potential harm of memes.

Factor	Low risk	Moderate risk	High risk
Ownership	Clear and transparent ownership from @NAFO_Official X Account.	Some memes from identifiable sources, other anonymous.	Anonymously spread with unclear origins.
Hijackability	Original content, difficult to repurpose without losing original context.	Some memes could be repurposed, but with some effort.	Easily hijackable, high chances for spreading misinformation.
Convertibility	Memes maintained consistent messages and narrative; core message is hard to alter.	Core messages of the memes could have been twisted, but the main intent remained the same.	Core message could easily be lost, which caused high potential for narrative change.
Potential to harm	Meme was benign, unlikely being used for harmful causes.	Meme could have been used for spreading misinformation.	Memes could have been weaponized for widespread misinformation or harm.

Ownership: Memes with clear and transparent ownership, such as those from the @NAFO_Official X account, had low risk of being used harmfully, as their origin was easily verified. On the other hand, memes which were spread anonymously, particularly with unknown origins, had a high risk for misuse to contribute to the spread of unaccountable and potentially damaging narratives.

Hijackability: Memes with original context were difficult to repurpose and pose a low risk for being hijacked for harmful purposes. Memes with not original content or narrative were more vulnerable to hijackability have a higher chance of spreading misinformation, as their content could be easily manipulated to fit alternative narratives.

Convertibility: Memes with consistent messages and narratives were less likely to be harmful. Those memes whose core messages could be circumvented posed a moderate risk because the intent could have been distorted, even if the underlying message remained identifiable. However, when the core message of a meme could have easily been lost, there was a high potential for significant narrative change, which could have led to potential harm.

The interplay between these factors pointed to a range of risks associated with memes that affected their potential to disrupt or damage social and political discourse. The potential for harm varies according to different factors such as the political climate, digital literacy of the audience and the social attitudes at the time of the meme dissemination. Potential of harm is less likely to be activated if the societal and political conditions are stable. The risk could be increased if different societal groups were polarized, but still not in a state of conflict. Highest risk would be at high tensions or conflict situations. It could also be seen from the table that the degree of risk was increased substantially when memes lacked clear ownership, had easily convertible messages, or were easily hijackable. These findings pointed out that memes required vigilance in the creation and sharing of memes. Audiences also had to evaluate memes critically to avoid misinformation.

6   CONCLUSION

This study acknowledged the intricate influence mechanisms used in NAFO memes in conflict situations. The guiding research question- "What are the influence mechanisms utilized in NAFO memes?", this served as guidance for the research. The aim of this study was to explore their role in shaping, challenging, and satirizing geopolitical narratives. With the comprehensive analysis of the memes, multiple nuanced ways were found in which digital culture facilitates the distribution and evolution of narratives, which simultaneously influence and reflect societal and political discourses. It is important to place the influence of NAFO memes in the context of modern communication technologies and their powerful capacity to negotiate the intricate interplay of comedy, satire, and political criticism before delving into the discussion of these findings.

The analysis of the NAFO memes shows that they not only function as vehicles of communication and entertainment but also as powerful tools of narrative construction and dissection, as (Marian-Arnat, 2023) mentions in his study. NAFO meme's ability to condense complex geopolitical tensions into a concise, humorous, and easily absorbable format highlights a significant shift in how information is consumed and propagated in the digital age. The 'Fella' character, which played a great role in the research, created a vast juxtaposition against the power of international conflicts, creating a narrative that invites the audience to approach geopolitical conflicts through a lens that is both critical and accessible at the same time.

When comparing the findings with the existing literature on political discourse and memes, NAFO memes elucidate a broader trend in narrative warfare and digital activism. As seen in many other digital movements, NAFO memes take advantage of online platforms to democratize content creation and distribution (Dynel, 2024). Through this interaction on the platform's meme, discourses are vastly enriched and given diverse perspectives, putting up with dogmatic readings of geopolitical events (Dynel, 2024). The pervasive influence of NAFO memes in both geopolitical and digital landscapes emphasize evolving communication in the digital environment. NAFO memes are great examples of how different online platforms can act as battlegrounds for narrative control. In the battleground of the digital era, humour and satire have become potential weapons in the arsenal of public perception and opinion. This phenomenon raises questions about the responsibility of platforms in drawing a fine line between satire and misinformation, especially within sensitive geopolitical conflicts.

The analysis has illuminated how convertibility, ownership, and hijackability are pivotal in the dissemination and impact of NAFO memes. Convertibility refers

to the ease with which the pivotal elements of the NAFO memes can be modified or adapted while still retaining the original message or intent of the message. Within NAFO memes, it can be done with ease. The main character in the data of this research, Fella, can be seen as a versatile canvas that can be projected onto different texts and contexts while retaining the original narrative. Great adaptability and convertibility with NAFO memes allow them to survive modifications and altering while still retaining the impact and influence on the audience.

Hijackability, on the other hand, stands for the sensitivity of these memes to be repurposed or altered by different groups of individuals for diverse purposes, which can be quite diverse from the original creator's intentions. Instances like these reveal the double-edged sword of internet memes; while memes allow creators to quickly respond or comment on the zeitgeist, they also open the door to interpretations that can weaken or skew the original message. NAFO itself has taken the advantage of hijacking the narratives and turning them upside down, which weakens the original narrative and puts NAFO in more favourable position. Examples of those upside-down turns shows that NAFO can respond to the hijackings with counter-narratives (See figure 16).

Ownership in the context of internet memes and digital culture is often collaboratively created and shared, of which NAFO is a great example. This communal ownership of narratives lacks control within narratives. This affects the authority, credulity, and persuasive power of narratives embedded in NAFO memes. However, this allows more fluid and adaptable discussion and creates a more democratic form of narrative shaping and sharing. Communal ownership of the meme also does not lose its original message, but rather, reinforces NAFO's collective identity and mission even if it is altered my multiple users. In previous research, hijackability and convertibility were tangentially addressed using the following terms: '*repragmatisation*' and '*pragmatic entrenchment*' (Dynel, 2024).

Individual preferences, meme characteristics, digital amplification, contextual relevance, and interactive engagement collectively effect the shareability and impact of the NAFO memes according to media effects theory. It revealed the complex dynamics of modern memes, where they are not just humour and satire, but also strategic instruments shaping public perception and discourse.

As (Shifman, 2014) categorized memes according to their different elements into mentalist-driven, behavior-driven, and inclusive types provides framework for understanding varied impacts of memes in digital communication. When distinguishing memes into these categories it can be understood that memes not only entertain but also influence public discourse and individual perceptions. Integrating also Shifman's (2014) meme genres under those categories, reveals how each genre is constructed, offering deeper understanding into their specific roles and effects within online culture.

Ethicality of using memes as a tool for communication depends fully on the content and the context. If the memes are made by following ethical standards, the ethicality should not be a problem. Ethical reflection in meme creation and sharing is crucial due to the fine line between humour and potential misinformation. When assessing ethical standards through TARES by (Baker & Martinson, 2001), it revealed the dual role of NAFO memes. As tools of satire and advocacy, they present ethical that arise from balancing between humour with political engagement.

Potential harms with memes, highlighted through hijackability, convertibility and ownership, reflect significant ethical and social implications. These elements affect critically on memes, and how they can harmfully affect public and social discourse. It is crucial to develop strategies to mitigate the risks associated with harmful memes, including promoting media literacy, fostering critical thinking, and implementing robust fact-checking practices to prevent misinformation or other harmful consequences from spreading through memes.

The harm of the memes towards different organisations could be eased or prevented fully by engaging in proactive digital monitoring. Through monitoring, the shaping of public perception by memes would be better understood. Organisations should implement strategic communication that would shape the negative narratives that memes create. Focus on media literacy and building robust and transparent communication with factual accuracy could counteract any misleading information spread by meme. Also, attention must be paid on how memes might manipulate emotional responses or showcase complex issues into overly simplistic or biased viewpoints.

One aspect which has gotten less attention, is the long-term effects of memes. Some of the ideologies might me normalized with the help of memes; those ideologies could be harmful discourses for larger entities. For example, NAFO memes might create a completely new discourse related to Russia- Ukraine situation and the political viewpoints of those countries.

The methodological approach adopted in this thesis provides a robust base for revealing the convoluted interplay of satire, humour, and geopolitical commentary in these digital artifacts. Qualitative thematic and content analysis allowed in-depth analysis of the memes, revealing underlying narratives and understanding their role within political discourse and digital culture. It is important to acknowledge that the selected approach limited the subjective interpretation of the data and generalized the findings from a specific set of memes to a broader context. In addition, one methodological challenge is the digital environment in which online discourse may vary and evolve significantly during the research. These challenges could benefit from incorporating quantitative methods to complement qualitative methods. Adding quantitative methods would provide more

comprehensive results and views of meme engagement, reach, and impact on diverse digital platforms.

The reliability of the study was ensured through a methodology in which the collection of research data could be replicated under similar conditions and consistent results. The selection of memes was performed under clearly defined criteria, which ensured that every selected meme was relevant to the research and represented the broader meme culture in digital discourse in international conflicts. By triangulating the data with previously published research on digital memes and their sociopolitical effects, the study's conclusions were validated and shown to be consistent with established theories and studies.

Exploration of NAFO memes has revealed multiple avenues for future research. Given the rapidly evolving digital environment and the interplay between memes, society, and politics, further investigation is warranted. Meme influence could be investigated across different cultural contexts and how memes are interpreted and adapted in those cultures. When considering ethical perspectives on memes, it could be beneficial to develop or investigate comprehensive ethical guidelines for meme creators and distributors, especially in a politically sensitive environment. The role of memes in digital activism could be further investigated by examining how activist groups and social movements use memes as tools for mobilization, resistance, and advocacy. Also, the long-term effects of memes could be researched, to see the impact of memes in communication in the long run.

To conclude the thesis, the research embarked on a thorough investigation of NAFO memes, revealing the mechanisms through which they influence, satirize, and shape geopolitical narratives in the digital environment. The comprehensive analysis identified that memes are not only conduits of communication and entertainment but also powerful tools for criticism and narrative development. The versatility of the 'Fella' character revealed that memes can act as tools for the audience to face complex and multifaceted problems, such as geopolitical conflicts, through a lens that is both accessible and critical.

As we look to the future, memes will evolve, and the environment in which they act will also evolve. Memes have paved the way for digital communication and have played a vital role in digital narratives. Memes are likely to evolve into highly sophisticated, influential, and immersive form of communication. Playing a pivotal role in cultural exchange, political discourses, and social activism. It is time to prepare ourselves to manoeuvre the blurred lines between virtual and real-world battlegrounds.

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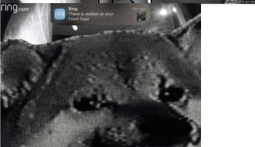
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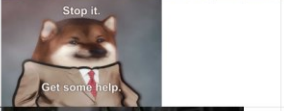Smith, C. A. (2019). Weaponized iconoclasm in Internet memes featuring the expression 'Fake News'. *Discourse & Communication*, *13*(3), 303–319. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481319835639
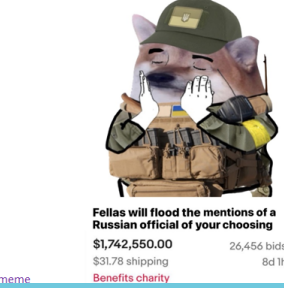
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Thematic analysis of the NAFO memes.

MEME	Visual Imagery	Textual content	Contextual refrences	Colour and design elements	Emotional Tone	Intertextuality	
Eat shit, nerd	Shiba Inu's dog face pasted on to a military imagery to satirize conflict. Combination with Fella's face and human body humorously softens the militatristic tone. Clothing refers to mixing formal and informal, creating humorous contrast between them.	"Eat shit, nerd", caption uses colloquial and dispespectful language, with likely to mock or belittle an adversary. Interaction with such langauge undermines the seriousness of the military pose. Juxtaposition between visual and the verbal expression.	Could be referring to absurdity of online battles. Referring to the tendency to use strong and direct langauge in intern culture's confrontations.	Simplicity of the layout and image focuses viewers attention to the text and dog's face. "Harsh" editing highlights the edited parts, which are the text bubble and Shiba Inu's face.	Humorous and sarcastic tone, combining serious object (armed conflict) and memes to convey its message. Satire of war. Used digital communication platform for sending the message.	Doge meme	
Best propaganda money can buy	Shiba Inu in the center. Presented as laid back character, humorous take on leisure and possibly excess. Referring to carefree lifestyle.	MONEY CAN BUY", satires funded disinfromation. Juxtaposition of the chill dog and the text refers to critique how disinformation can be casually disseminated in	Could be referencing how money affects today's media.	Bold design, capital letters and black contrast, drawing attention to the message. Graphics under "money" emphasies the theme of financial influence.	Humorous and ironic. Underscoring relaxation and enjoyment to underscore the serious issue of propaganda.	May be referencing to the issue of finance in political meddaging, narrative about commerializing media and politics.	
Cartoon dog hurt spots	Presenting the silouette of a Shiba Inu. Satirical take on therapy on medical diagrams, for the Russian propaganda, and how NAFO's counter propaganda hurt them.	Filled with playful or nonsense terms. Emphasising the absudrity of the diagram with the added "NOT TO SCALE" text above the heightscale.	Referring to people figuratively "hurt" by online discourse, particulary about politics amd ideological debates.	Bold, clean, hand drawn and primary colors give meme simple and child-like aestethics. Satriring the serious nature of discussion about conflicts and politics.	Humorous and satiric tone, referring to the exaggerated emotions online discussions may rise, in this case Russians reactions to NAFO memes.	Several refers to other memes; NAFO, Saddam Hussein hiding place, CARLOS!!, bonk etc.	
Person of the year	Shiba Inu edited as person of the year in Time-magazine. Referring to great achievements by the NAFO. With the dited hands and closed eyes looking really satisfied. Humorous.	Text parodies the TIME magazine cover.	Referring to the TIME magazine.	Bold desing, iconic color scheme from TIME magazine. Mininal desing draws attention to the Shiba Inu and the text. Also the design mimics the layout of the magazine cover, lending the meme an air of mock formality and importance.	Humorous and satirical.	TIME magazine. Also the satisfied expression referring to the meme where the man is satisfied. Doge meme.	
There is motion at your Front Door	Shiba Inu in security camera view, dressed as a kid. Owner of the house propably Russia and NAFO knocking the door because of all the propaganda. (vähä kyssäri tää)	"There is motion at your Front Door." This text typically indicates a visitor's presence but is humorously contradicted by the non-threatening and comical appearance of the Fella.		The black and white color scheme, typical for night vision footage in security cameras, adds a layer of authenticity to the meme, contrasting with the comical intrusion of the Fella.	Light-hearted and humorous	Receiving alerts from security cameras. Same template used in other memes also.	
There is motion at your Front Door	Shiba Inu in security camera view, dressed as a kid. Owner of the house propably Russia and NAFO knocking the door because of all the propaganda. (vähä kyssäri tää)	"There is motion at your Front Door." This text typically indicates a visitor's presence but is humorously contradicted by the non-threatening and comical appearance of the Fella.		The black and white color scheme, typical for night vision footage in security cameras, adds a layer of authenticity to the meme, contrasting with the comical intrusion of the Fella.	Light-hearted and humorous	Receiving alerts from security cameras. Same template used in other memes also.	
Two wolves inside me	Two Shiba Inus darwn into a human's head. Other is tyipcal russian attire and the other is in kids costume. Refrring to thinking about Fellas.	The phrase "I don't have two wolves inside me I have these guys" humorously subverts the well-known metaphor about internal duality, suggesting a more light-hearted inner conflict.		Simple and clean, highlights the Fellas and dfrwaing attention to them.	Comedic and satritic.	"Two wolves"-meme. typically used to convey deeper philosophical musings, by introducing an unexpected and humorous twist.	
ok ima fight this dog	Shiba Inu in military costume figtin a boxer with thr Russian flag. On the seconf phase multiple Fellas have defeated the boxer. Refers to the community of Fellas and how they cannot be beaten up by Russians.	The phrase "Expansion is non-negotiable" further adds to the theme of ongoing struggle and determination.	Referencing to the conflict between NAFO and Russian as an actual fight.	Different indentities represented well with the colours and other tools. White background highlights the chracters. Bold and clumsy editing.	Defiant and humorous tone. Juxapotisioning seriousness of international conflict with playful meme.	Doge meme	
I ain't reading all that	Shiba Inu placed on casual messaging app interface. Signifying the casuality of the NAFO's reaction to propaganda.	Messages representing nonchalant and humorus response to a presumably length message, which the reade is not inteestred in reading.	Referring to common oneline interaction where long text may be answered with a generic short answer with no intrest.	Typical message app interface, boosting memes relatability, as it smimicing common digital communication setting.	Humorous and apathetic, capturing laziness.	Presenting todays online communication culture of short attention pans and trend of using short responses. Doge meme	

Meme	Visual	Text	Reference	Color/Theme	Tone	Origin		Image
Pathetic	Shiba Inu edited into a scene from the Simpsons tv series. Neutral face of the shiba inu boosts the "pathetic"	Single word "pathetic". It's a direct and concise expression, often used to belittle whatever is being pointed at or referenced.		Bright and cartoonish color scheme, contrasting with the serious and mocking text. Simplicity bringing the focus on the text and pointing finger.	Mockery, and sense of superity.	Original photo from the Simpsons. Headmaster Skinner mocking Bart Simpson.		
Stop it. Get some help	Shiba Inu edited on Michael Jordan's body. It has professional visuals because of the suit and the "photoshootish" background	Text from Michael Jordan's anti-drug public service announcement. Really straigth forward.	Referring to bad behaviour in internet or elsewhere. With humorous way.	Blurred background highlight the Fella and the text.	Patronizing advide-giving tone. Professional-ish.	Michael Jordan anti-drug public announcement.		
Cringe	Shiba Inu's head pasted onto a person in a court room scene. Setting and persons behind creates contrast between the humour and seriousness.	Using internet slang term "cringe" and "based". The text acts as a faux legal judgment, adding a layer of irony.	Referrencing to "canceling", publicly shaming someone for their behaviour.	Dark theme, characteric of still films, white text standing out. Poor editing highlighting the satire of the court.	Humourous and poking. Poking the seriousness how onilne communities might take themselves.	Referring to the "You are accused of anti-Soviet behaviour"-meme.		
FELLA described	Fella described on the cover of a costume package. Could refer that Fellas are for evetyone, and easily available. Used Adidas three stripes. Usually worn in Russia, could be for mocking the russians.	Playful and humorous description of a Fella. Described as funny and cute individual. ONE SIXE FITS MOST, referring that NAFO is for everyone.		Mimicin of real marketed products. Simple editing.	Light-hearted and humorous		Doge meme	
Mr Lee vs. Nafo	Presenting Fella againt Senator Mr. Lee in court. Humorous and absurd way to represent NAFO against US polisicts, who are against sending funds to Ukraine. Shiba Inu sitting peacefully, Mr. Lee clearly has something to explain which gives the impression he is in some kind of trouble.	Clear name badges for every attendant. Clear message sent.	Referring to Mr. Lee commenting on Twitter about NAFO's funding and being against funding Ukraine. Could also refer to the internet phenomenan "canceling"	The image has a dark, muted color palette characteristic of film stills, with the bright, white text standing out to draw attention to the 'verdict.'	Satirical and humorous. Fella meme instered into serious environment.		Doge meme	
Who ordered the toasted sub	Shiba Inu holding a sandwhich "subway" which is filled with a buring submarine. Satiric and humorous way to represetn seruous situation in war. Ä	"Who ordered the toasted sub", refers humorously to the burning submarine when also meaning the sandwhich. Making a serious situation a lor more light and humorous.	Referring to the easiness or satirical reference to military defeat or destrucition.	Simple and sloppy editing, focus on the toasted sub.	Light-hearted and humorous. Creating contrast between serious and humorous topic. Satiric.	Subway sandwiches can be filled as wished, in this case it was the toasted submarine. Doge meme.		
Flooding Russian officials	Including 'Fella' photoshopped onto a military figure. With combat gear and with a pose presenting its happiness or satisfcation. Absurd with a dog wearing military gear.	The meme includes an overlay text stating "Fellas will flood the mentions of a Russian official of your choosing," indicating a coordinated online action against a public figure. The large monetary value, ostensibly a bid, combined with the statement, serves to mock the concept of fundraising or bidding for an act of online trolling or activism.	Referring to online activism and trolling.		Light hearted and humorous editing with the doge.	Humorous tone combined with serious business. Satiric.	Doge meme	
Slaps helmet of vatnik	The meme features a caricature of a character known colloquially as a "vatnik" — a term used to mock nationalist supporters of the Kremlin's ideology. The character's head has been replaced with the Shiba Inu dog face (known from the Doge meme), wearing a military helmet with Russian insignia. A man's hand is illustrated as if slapping the helmet, indicating a dismissive or belittling gesture.	The text reads "-Slaps helmet of vatnik- This bad boy can spit so many kremlin talking points and braindead geopolitical takes," which is a play on a popular car salesman meme format. It ridicules the propagandistic rhetoric by equating it with mindless repetition of Kremlin talking points.	This meme references the 'vatnik' archetype to critique and ridicule individuals who unthinkingly parrot official Kremlin rhetoric. The use of 'vatnik' itself is a politically loaded term within Eastern European internet culture and points to heated geopolitical debates.	The meme uses bold, contrasting colors.	Mocking and derisive rone. Belitle the subject.	Carsalesman meme, where the salesman slaps cars, also doge included.		
Suffer	Shiba Inu in old-fashioned television. Showcasing vintage aesthetics.	"suffer" referring to suffering, not fitting with the non-threatening Shiba Inu.	Referring to consuming media, and suffering from it.	Bright colors, contrast, pulling attention to the text.	Darkly humorous tone	Doge meme		

USSR Propaganda	Presenting two different visualisations of Shiba Inus. The first is edited to appear muscular and robust, labeled as "USSR propaganda," while the second shows a more typical Shiba Inu with a worried expression, labeled as "Russian propaganda today."	Each image is accompanied by a caption: for the USSR image, it reads, "the whole course of history led to this moment of glory, comrades," evoking the tone of grand historical narratives often used in Soviet propaganda. The caption for the current Russian image says, "help, the west wants to make us gay and muslim'", parodying what the creator perceives as a modern Russian propaganda narrative that portrays the West as a corrupting influence.	Referring to perceived shift in propaganda styles and messages.	Simplicity drawing attention to the doges and texts.	Satrical tone	Soviet propaganda and russian propaganda. Doge meme	
List	Shiba Inu dog chilling.	The text is a barrage of internet slang and combative phrases commonly used to dismiss someone's comments online. Each term ("Don't care," "Didn't ask," "Cope," etc.) is a retort that trivializes the importance of another's statement or opinion.	Referring to digital culture and mocking other people online.	Plain text and editing drawing focus on the text	Mocking and contemptous tone	Meme relies on the audience's familiarity with online discourse. Doge meme	

Thematization
Satire
Digital Culture
Absurdity
Meme intertextuality
Visuals