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Digital War Discourse on Reddit:
Analysing the Dissemination & Effect of the Russo-Ukrainian War-
related Content

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The style of the summary is **Abstract**.

The core of the research for this bachelor's dissertation was to find what kind of communities have formed on the forum site Reddit, and how these communities handle the subject of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The research method employed is a qualitative analysis. Three subreddits were examined to gather materials from their comment sections for analysis. The subreddits had great variations in their sizes, i.e. the number of members, to provide different environments to examine.

While this study is in the field of digital culture, it also relies on the field of psychology since understanding human behaviours is a vital part of receiving a proper understanding of how these online spaces work. In addition, reliable research papers and studies centering around online communities and especially ones that have formed around darker subject matter, were not readily available.

The findings of the study are that these three online communities in Reddit, all contain extreme content depicting real human suffering, even though all of them explicitly state that such posts should not be glorified and should only be posted under a specific tag that will warn the users of the possibly distressing imagery. However, posts like them only tended to be made into entertainment and the suffering of the Russian soldiers was glorified which led to the active culture dehumanisation in all three subreddits, through edited videos and foul language.

Keywords: War; Online discourse; OODT; Content; Community; Dehumanisation

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1. Introduction

I chose this particular subject for my bachelor's dissertation for a few different reasons. One such factor was how the topic is extremely current. The impacts of the invasion, in one form or another, have been felt outside of Ukraine, especially elsewhere in Europe. So, the timely status and proximity of the war were very large influences in my decision making. Another notable reason was the "accessibility" of this war. I frequently encountered videos from the front lines of the war, featuring unfiltered combat footage. It struck me as incredibly odd to be living in an era where war content is being shared online akin to typical videos produced by e.g. influencers.

I wanted to examine how this dissemination actually happens and in what way people are consuming this media. The last major reason was having had the privilege of being able to help some Ukrainian refugee families that had come to Finland seeking asylum. These people came from many different backgrounds and their ages span from 1-50 years old. Getting to hear the stories of their life back home, of the war and of the people they had to leave behind have been one of the most monumental experiences of my life. Being able to offer a helping hand to people in a situation like this, in any manner, is an honour.

In sum, this dissertation and the preceding research focuses on the spread of this content relating to the war in Ukraine on Reddit, and specifically on the three chosen subreddits. While conducting the research in these communities, the examination also centred on how these users perceive the posts and their possible gruesome content.

1.1. Glossary

In this section I will list and briefly explain key words and concepts that are prevalent throughout the dissertation. These words are very well known and widely used on the internet, but they might not be familiar or easily understandable for someone who does not spend much time in various internet-based communities, which is why they are listed here. This addition will hopefully assist the reader to conceptualise the core of the study.

Subreddit

- A particular community within the Reddit site itself. Anyone with an account can create a subreddit, which other users can join if they are interested in the subject it was made for. The creator can make his or her own rules for the communities in addition to the Reddit guidelines.

Gore

- Refers to imagery depicting blood and violence. It is also a subgenre of horror films. As internet slang, it can also describe something someone might perceive as too violent for themselves or too “dark”.

Toxic

- Traditionally means something poisonous, however, as a slang term it refers to behaviours of others that have negative intent or are instigatory.

Automoderator MOD/BOT

- A moderation tool used to assist human moderators. It can be programmed to perform specific tasks, such as flagging possible violations in posts that go against the given set of rules¹.

NSFW

- An abbreviation of the phrase *Not Safe For Work*. It is often included in posts online that contain any form of content depicting “adult themes” e.g. sex, violence, or anything else age restricted.

Othering Online Discourse Theory

- The OOD or OODT, is an online research tool created by Elina Vaahensalo, who is a doctoral researcher at the University of Turku in the Digital Culture, Landscape and Cultural Heritage degree programme². The theory can be used to inspect and analyse how

¹ Reddit support, 2024.

² University of Turku, 2024. utu.fi

interactions in the online space can perpetuate old stereotypes and reinforce the imbalances of power created by othering³.

1.2. Research questions, material and method

This dissertation is based around one main research question and two sub-questions. The main research question is as follows:

1. What type of online communities have formed on Reddit due to the spread of content relating to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war?

The two sub-questions are:

2. What kind of content is being spread in these community posts?
3. What is the interaction and the use of language like between users on the platform?

The main research question is admittedly somewhat vague and could be answered in different ways depending on the researcher's focal point, which is why the two sub-questions were added. The main objective is to answer the main research question through, or with the help, of the sub-questions.

All the research material gathered for this dissertation is publicly available content. Reddit does not require you to have an account or sign-in in any way to be able to read posts and the comments underneath. The materials consist of photos, articles and videos, of which, all were used in the research process. The main focal point being the comments and the discussions that were influenced by these different mediums. On different subreddits their moderators have checked the validity and sources of some of the shared information, especially if such posts have contained relatively current strategic information about the Ukrainian troops' location at the front

³ Vaahensalo, 2021.

lines. To the best of my abilities, I have also tried to find the origin of the chosen posts and verify their authenticity.

I chose to examine three different subreddits for this dissertation. The subreddits were chosen based on their size (the number of members), their view on the war related content and the actual content being disseminated. The goal of these defining points was to acquire an extensive understanding of different views on the matter, and also to have variety between the amount of people interacting on the forums. The chosen subreddits are: r/Ukraine, r/UkraineWarVideoReport and r/LoveForUkraine. At the time of this research, January 2024, r/Ukraine has 897 000 members, r/UkraineWarVideoReport has 720 000 members and r/LoveForUkraine has 9100 members. I have added a quote from each of the subreddits at the beginning of their individual chapters in the dissertation, to shortly summarise the atmosphere of each one.

The process of investigating the subreddits and collecting materials took place from the start of October 2023 to the end of January 2024. The research method employed is a qualitative analysis, with an added focus on discourse and content analysis. Qualitative analysis is somewhat of an “umbrella term” which is why I wanted to specify the methods of discourse and content analysis. Discourse and content analysis are also very similar, but they do entail key differences. Discourse analysis is a method with a focus on the interconnections between people, and it aims to consider the social and cultural differences. Content analysis on the other hand, examines the conversations at “face value” i.e. the words, topics and communication as a whole. I will also be relying on the Othering Online Discourse Theory (OODT or OOD) created by Elina Vaahensalo.

1.3. Ethical questions regarding the research

No formal questions of ethics personally arose, before or during, the research process. As mentioned before, the materials are fully publicly available. The users observed used the provided optional anonymity and operated under pseudonyms. In any case, no usernames or

identifiable features will be brought up in this dissertation. The intention is to view these interactions as a whole, not through specific users.

However, something being publicly available, should not be taken as an immediate release of any ethical considerations. The field of internet-based research lacks definitive ethical standards, but some institutions have devised their own guidelines and protocols⁴. So currently researchers who study online spaces have to rely heavily on their education and possible protocols when conducting their research, because there are no universally agreed upon rules, just individual guidance.

It could be argued that the consumption of some of the content containing real instances of death or human suffering should be subject to ethical scrutiny and exploration. Even though the core focus of this study is not on the actual content of the posts, I did have to look through them to get the full context of the unfolding conversations in the comments. Therefore, I inevitably took part in the consumption of such media, and in that way, was a part of the consumer base. *Gore*, as it is commonly referred to online, was not banned on all the subreddits, so it also did not have to particularly be sought out. It is shown that high levels of exposure to real-life and fake e.g. movie violence, does result in some undesirable effects such as diminished empathy and physiological desensitisation⁵. Thus, I often asked myself whether or not it was right of me to knowingly look through the posts. Ultimately, I thought it to be too crucial to leave out of consideration. It is important to notice and understand unpleasant things in our surroundings, especially when wilfully ignoring them could result in us avoiding them and disregarding vital information⁶.

2. Reddit

Reddit is a social media platform and a forum website that allows its users to share information in many forms, such as photos, videos or comments that engage other users in discussion. Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman are the founders of the platform, and it was launched in 2005.

⁴ Harriman & Patel, 2014.

⁵ Mrug, Madan, Cook III, Wright, 2015.

⁶ Scrivner, 2021.

Huffman is the current CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of Reddit. The front page of reddit.com provides a short description of the site:

“Dive Into Anything

Reddit is home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection. Whether you’re into breaking news, sports, TV fan theories, or a never-ending stream of the internet’s cutest animals, there’s a community on Reddit for you.”⁷

Reddit itself consists of subreddits and according to the latest available data, there are more than 2.8 million sub-reddits⁸. These subreddits can have their own rules that are enforced by the moderators, who usually are the creators of the subreddits or volunteers. Anyone can access these forums, but in order to post or interact with others, one does need to have an account, which is free. However, Reddit Gold or Reddit Premium is an optional subscription-based version of Reddit that grants users some perks like an ad-free browsing experience. There are also Automoderator MODs on the community pages which are bots designed to flag possible inappropriate messages that will be then evaluated by the human moderators.

The platform has also received its fair share of criticism. The main points of criticism I have come across on many different occasions and on multiple different platforms have been about the “toxic” communities and the censorship on the platform. These toxic communities, or subreddits, have come under scrutiny for the content and harmful ideologies they promote. The responsibility undoubtedly falls on Reddit itself, since it hosts the online spaces for such communities. Overall, hate speech has become progressively common within everyday communication⁹. During my research I did not come across subreddits that could be described as plain toxic, but I definitely observed the features of such communities in the process, as I will demonstrate in later sections.

Reddit, and more specifically some of its “darkest” subreddits in terms of content, have often been compared to the infamous sites of 4Chan and LiveLeak. 4Chan and LiveLeak are forum-

⁷ Reddit.com, January 2024.

⁸ Reddit Metrics, 2021.

⁹ Vaahensalo, 2021.

based platforms as well, and LiveLeak in particular was known for its continued hosting of violent, gruesome media. LiveLeak was shut down in 2021 after fifteen years of operation¹⁰. One such well known subreddit was called r/WatchPeopleDie and it was finally banned in 2019, after six years of being on the site, for violating its content policy¹¹. The policy in question was Rule 1 which included the statement that “Communities and users that incite violence or that promote hate based on identity or vulnerability will be banned.”¹². The enforcement of this rule is likely what draws in the criticism against the platform since, from what I have observed during the research as well, it is not often that this kind of content or behaviour receives any repercussions.

2.1. r/Ukraine

“Enjoying seeing the direct line of my tax dollars to the F-16’s doing their thing. Slava Ukraine.”
(10.1.2024)

The subreddit r/Ukraine has 897 000 members with around 2000 members active at all times, on average. It was created on the 23rd of December 2008, so before the 2014 invasion of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia or the current invasion that officially started on the 24th of February 2022. There is also a description of the subreddit offered on the right-side column of the page which reads: *“HERE UKRAÏHA TAKES CENTER STAGE - The purpose of r/Ukraine is to amplify Ukrainian voices. We are at war, so content is tightly moderated to keep our community safe. Share and discuss UKRAÏHA and her glorious people, history, geography, language, art, culture, values, and experiences during wartime. Sharing of russian narratives in any way, shape or form is banned.”*. This description is intended to highlight the community values the subreddit is based on. In essence, r/Ukraine aims to preserve Ukrainian culture in the online space and will utilise censorship of pro-Russian views in order to do so.

It was not possible to scroll all the way down to the beginning of the forum, but by using the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, it is possible to see that posts in 2010, which was the first

¹⁰ Vincent, 2021.

¹¹ Stephen, 2019.

¹² Reddit content policy, 2024.

time the site was archived, were generally about mundane things relating to Ukraine. The crawl performed by the Wayback Machine shows three peaks of popularity on the site; first in 2014 during the first invasion, a second in 2022 during the second and ongoing invasion and a third in 2023¹³. *The crawl* effectively means a point in time when the Wayback Machine has archived a version of a website, and it is partly based on the popularity and activity on the site at that time. This archival service is by no means perfect as it is only able to preserve “snapshots” of these sites. It is, nonetheless, an effective tool.

r/Ukraine has thirteen “sub rules” and rule categories in addition to Reddit’s own set of rules. “1. *This is r/Ukraine*, 2. *No Content Depicting Recent Impact or Stationary Aid Sites, UA Troops Movements, or Air Defenses*, 3. *Only English & Ukrainian Language*, 4. *No Foreign Politics*, 5. *Honest Titles; Include Quality Sources and Content*, 6. “*Just for Support*” or “*Armchair General*” *Discussions*, 7. *About Refugee Support/Ukrainian cultural discussions/Surveys/Petitions*, 8. *Donation Requests and Advertisements*, 9. *Artistic content only on ArtFridays. No Memes.*, 10. *Reddit Content Policy: Brigading, Doxxing, Death wishes etc.*, 11. *Reposts and Breaking Topics*, 12. *Be Nice! No Trolling, Flaming, Provocation or Hate Speech* and 13. *How to be banned from r/Ukraine*”. I list these rules to provide a better view of the core of the subreddit and its intended purpose. There are more to the listed rules and categories, but going through them in depth does not serve a beneficial purpose at this point.

The content this subreddit currently consists of are articles, videos, photos and individual opinions posted by the members. The contents of the media posted were overall quite general but did include numerous posts of NSFW (Not Safe For Work) or graphic content. The balance of the general and graphic content was quite equal, with the graphic showing up in somewhat of a bigger margin. Altogether r/Ukraine could well be described as a combination of r/UkraineWarVideoReport and r/LoveForUkraine, in regards to the content.

¹³ Internet Archive Wayback machine, 2023.

2.2. r/UkraineWarVideoReport

“This is for sure the coolest footage so far”

(3.10.2023)

The r/UkraineWarVideoReport subreddit has 720 000 members and an average of around 3500 members active at all times. It was created on the 24th of February 2022, on the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As the name suggests, this Reddit community is exclusively focused on the war and its updates. The subreddit has six rules under which the members must operate. The rules and rule categories are: “1. Posts must be related to the Ukrainian war, 2. Posting rules, 3. Banned Content/Topics/Behaviour and Types of Posts, 4. Title rules, 5. Blood, Gore and Death must be marked as NSFW and 6. Reposts”. They are explained more in depth on the right-side column of the community page. Breaking any of these rules will result in the unsuitable post being deleted or the user receiving a ban from the community. There are 10 moderators on the subreddit.

Every post made on the page has a pinned comment at the top of the comment section from an Automoderator bot. It states: “*Please remember the human. Adhere to all Reddit and sub rules. Toxic comments (including incitement of violence/hate, genocide, glorifying death etc) WILL NOT BE TOLERATED, keep your comments civil or you will be banned. I am a bot, and this action was performed automatically. Please contact the moderators of this subreddit if you have questions or concerns.*”). However, the enforcement of these rules on the subreddit is objectively not sufficient. This statement will be further examined in the material overview section.

In regards to the content disseminated on the three subreddits, based on the research, r/UkraineWarVideoReport had the most shocking and distressing examples. Pertaining to the observations made while collecting material, most of the posts displayed some level of possibly distressing imagery. Posts such as these are not always marked with the correct or appropriate tag e.g. NSFW. And this goes directly against the “sub rules” which again, does exhibit some amount of insufficiency in the moderation. Threads on the page usually start with a genuine

reasonable question but devolve into crude and foul remarks. The possible question presented by a member generally gets an appropriate answer, however, most of the comments observed tend to be very dehumanising and brutal. This is especially the case when videos depict Russian troops getting hurt in any way. Whereas combat footage of UA troops receives praise, no matter how brutal their actions. Nonetheless, it is not surprising to see this effect of dehumanisation since the matter at hand is about war.

2.3. r/LoveForUkraine

*“Glory to Ukraine UA
About time Europe woke up to the Russian threat.”
(3.10.2023)*

The third chosen subreddit r/LoveForUkraine has 9100 members with around 50-100 members active. It was created on the 19th of March 2022, after the start of the current invasion. This community does not have its own “sub rules”, however, there is a description written on the page and it reads: *“This community, started by a non-Ukrainian but an Ukrainian-At-Heart, is for showing and sharing your love for Ukraine. To let Ukraine know that we stand with Ukraine and show our love through creative ideas to give moral support while Ukraine faces this horrible attack from Russia. Anyone posting Anti Ukraine or Pro Russian posts or comments will be banned immediately. Please be kind and show respect to one another. Peace and Love to All”*. The description does outline some regulation as to how members should conduct themselves on the community page. Besides that, the description is intended to bring forth the core values of the subreddit.

As for the content disseminated, out of the three, this subreddit contained the most ordinary and non-gruesome media. Most posts had zero comments with only a few upvotes (Reddit equivalent of likes and dislikes). This is likely caused by the much smaller user base. Additionally, the majority of the posts are news articles or videos. The news articles seemed mostly to be from reliable sources such as: The Kyiv Independent, The Kyiv Post, zsu.gov.ua (Ukraine Armed

Forces official website) and Новая газета Европа (Novaya Gazeta Europa), among many others. This does somewhat apply to all the other subreddits as well. r/LoveForUkraine is not devoid of content containing death or gore, however. And these types of posts seemed to receive the most engagement from other users. This was also a universal occurrence between the three subreddits; death and gore demanded more interaction. The subreddit clearly does not have any rules pertaining to content considered to be NSFW or gore. Some of these posts were marked with a NSFW tag, but these instances were scarce.

3. Material overview

Here I will provide some examples of the discussions observed and the subsequent use of language. In return, this will expectantly deliver a detectable pattern in the atmosphere of the subreddits. The research questions will also be explored through the analysis and presentation of the material gathered. As stated before, I will not be including the usernames of the commenters exhibited here, in order to protect the individual's identity, therefore, I will simply refer to them as: anonymous1, anonymous2, anonymous3, etc.. No two comments from the same user will be presented either, so the pseudonyms created here will always refer to a different person.

When it comes to the process of verifying content or the information circulating in the comments, apart from the aforementioned news outlets, I almost exclusively traced their origins to the encrypted messaging service Telegram. It seems as though it is the platform where the gore-videos especially, originate from. From there people repost these videos on Reddit, where they can be better discussed because of the forum format of that platform. Many videos and photos also had watermarks which made their verification easier. Footage of soldiers, especially UA troops, often had the individuals identifying themselves at the start and it was possible to see what brigade they were from based on their patches as well.

Overall, many of the posts on the subreddits consisted of articles that involved alleged Russian war crimes and defeats, which in turn led to lengthy conversations between the users in the

comments. An example of a well representative comment in a discussion that, for the most part, proceeded in a civil manner said:

“Another 15 tanks? Doesn’t seem sustainable at all unless these are T-55s. Are they doing uncoordinated assaults still or are these tanks being hit by precision munitions like the artillery?” (anonymous1)

This comment in particular did not evoke a response from other users, but it was somewhat echoed in another comment by another member:

“By far the most deaths in this war (and in most wars) are from artillery. This level of attrition of Russian artillery is unsustainable and is a clear sign of progress (and the best hope for saving lives of Ukrainian soldiers).” (anonymous2)

These kinds of mundane conversations about statistics and logistics of war were very commonplace in all the chosen subreddits.

Another point of interest that I discovered was that people were, quite unexpectedly, asking for the sources of posts or the information in the comments. This wasn’t a common occurrence that I observed, however, it did definitely demonstrate the critical media literacy skills of some of the userbase. A few examples of this were posted in the comment section under a post containing a picture of Ukrainian air defences:

*“This is a super cool picture if this is real
I really want to see how a 21st century command Center works in an actual starting war. To see the different assets tracked, see how Intel is coming in and is processed!
Super cool scify stuff!”* (anonymous3)

And then another comment from a different user actually asking for the source for himself:

“What is the actual source for this” (anonymous4)

I later noticed that these comments were the two most upvoted in the comment section, which showed that other users valued the insight or statements provided by them.

People often gathered in the comment sections of posts sharing information of fallen Ukrainian soldiers to show their respects. The comments under these posts were overwhelmingly positive, and the users behaved in a respectful manner offering their condolences and support for Ukraine. These next few comments were selected from a post relaying information of the death of a 38-year-old Ukrainian who died from Russian artillery shelling in Kherson on October 2nd 2023:

“Slava Ukraini glory to the heroes” (anonymous5)

“Heroiam slava!!! RIP!!!” (anonymous6)

“Served his country to the end, I bow before you in deep respect for you and your sacrifice.”
(anonymous7)

Posts like these had their comment sections filled with condolences and well wishes for Ukraine. There was not a single joke or rude remark made and everyone behaved respectfully towards the content the posts contained. These instances truly showed the capabilities of human empathy. However, the dichotomy between the treatment and reception towards the fallen Ukrainian citizens versus the Russian’s could not have been more pronounced. Thus, it was increasingly evident that this humanity and empathy was only extended outside one’s self if the recipient conformed to the same ideologies. The humanity showed was not then dependent upon recognising any human as an equal, rather it was dependent upon whether the commenter perceived the other as human enough.

3.1 The communities and their characteristics relating to the war

The goal of a community is to have it be composed of like-minded people. This will start to create an identity within the group of people, an identity tied to the norms of the culture formed by social cohesion. A community should not set out to be one on the basis of exclusion. Online communities are usually based around one specific subject of interest e.g. TV shows, sports teams or music. The online space is an extremely valuable opportunity for people to connect with their interests and other people alike. It provides an ease of access and reach like no other. At the same time, this is what is so dangerous about it. There is the possibility of people with harmful intentions and ideologies forming an online community and spreading such attitudes forward. This does happen daily online, however, we cannot condemn the whole of the internet because of such marginal actions.

The communities of the three subreddits had their own distinct features, as well as features in common. As stated previously, Reddit is somewhat infamous due to its communities often being labelled as “toxic”. However, I could not label any of the three subreddits as simply toxic. There were examples of such features as cruel language and overall behaviour, but these communities are not rooted in unfavourable, negative ideas. All had the focus of supporting Ukraine and some even had dedicated sections for positivity, e.g. the Art Fridays hosted by r/Ukraine.

While I would not go as far as to describe these communities as toxic, I would say that they are generally filled with reactionary behaviour. By reactionary behaviour I mean that based on the comments, users would often react with their emotions and personal beliefs rather than logic or objectivity. This once again, was not a very surprising finding since there is a war and they had chosen their side. It can be hard to stay in an objective mindset under such conditions. This is not to say that there were no conversations that had the users engaged in a rational, polite discussion. Their behaviour towards one another was almost always cordial, however, when those same manners had to be extended to someone who did not match the communities ideologies, the politeness was absent. This is also where the lack of moderation and applying the rules equally to all, really shined through.

3.2. The disseminated content

Previously I mentioned how during the research I observed that, no matter the subreddit, death and gore attracted the most attention from the users. On the pages, posts could be sorted by: *Hot*, *New*, *Top* or *Rising*. For example, most *Top* posts were articles, videos tagged as “other video”, or videos tagged as “aftermath” or “NSFW”. By testing this sorting system, the statement I made of content labelled as NSFW or containing some level of human suffering being the most popular or consumed, became substantiated. With this being a qualitative analysis, I cannot provide a statistic portraying how close in popularity articles were to videos, I can only say that they would show up in quite the equal amounts during my research.

Whether an article, video or a photo, if a post contained something negative (i.e. often death), many people in the comments would bring up their “morbid curiosity” as a reason for their consumption of it. Some would even contemplate why they were subjecting themselves to such media. This next presented interaction between two users was in response to a graphic video of Russian soldiers in a trench blown up by Ukrainian grenades:

“Yeah you can definitely see they’re hit with fragments. I’m getting too used to these videos of heads, arms, feet, torsos, legs flying around, expecting the most graphic gruesome shit every time. Can’t even tell ya why I watch to be honest heh” (anonymous8)

With another user replying:

“Morbid curiosity is one hell of a thing.” (anonymous9)

Humans are naturally curious creatures which has brought us far in our relatively brief history, and said curiosity, also covers the negative or “dark” information. The term morbid curiosity refers to the phenomena of people specifically seeking out information or coverage of violence e.g. on the internet or news¹⁴. It has also been regarded as one of the major psychological factors

¹⁴ Oosterwijk, 2017.

for people taking part in Dark tourism¹⁵. However, as common as the phenomena is, it is not fully understood due to the lack of scientific research¹⁶. Because of the amount of graphic content on the subreddits and these types of posts being the most popular, this side of human nature became increasingly clear. Even though I would be willing to argue that some of the cases I observed were by individuals from the not so “normal and healthy” side of the spectrum. I came to this conclusion based on their use of language, how they generally presented themselves and by being mindful of the fact that, especially in the case of r/UkraineWarVideoReport, a steady stream of death and gore are to be expected on the community page. Therefore, it shows people indeed willingly become members of these communities to have access to graphic media. Zuckerman and Litle have proposed that morbid curiosity is motivated by the person’s demand for excitation and novel stimuli¹⁷. This correlates to the findings of Mrug, Madan, et al., describing the “high” some individuals experience when viewing violent media¹⁸. Morbid curiosity in and of itself is not bad nor something to be concerned about.

During the research I came to the realisation that a large portion of the videos shared, containing combat footage or having been tagged as NSFW, were heavily edited. By heavily edited I mean that people had added music to them, editing it so that the things that occurred in the videos matched the rhythm of the music or that they were modified to be more entertaining in any other way. This was a disturbing revelation since the footage often depicted people dying or suffering. It was an exemplary illustration of the total desensitisation some users evidently had to viewing these situations. Even more perplexing was the fact that people in the comments did not seem to mind this editing and simply commented on how great and enjoyable the edit was. Under one such heavily edited video of a Russian soldier committing suicide on the battlefield, a user simply commented:

“*Song?*” (anonymous10)

Even though NSFW content was the most popular, in terms of the amount posted and the amount of interaction, there were a large number of more positive posts on all the subreddits. These

¹⁵ Edwards, 2020.

¹⁶ Oosterwijk, 2017.

¹⁷ Zuckerman & Litle, 1986.

¹⁸ Mrug, Madan, et al., 2017.

positive posts often contained information on how to support the Ukrainian troops, refugees and links to verified reliable sources to make donations to. Another great example of the subreddits being used for the purpose of creating positive content is the Art Fridays hosted exclusively by r/Ukraine. It was the only one out of the three actively working on dedicating a specified and designated time for positivity, in the form of poems, art and music. All of it was created by the users themselves who took part. In addition, there often were videos shared in which Ukrainian soldiers would thank people for the donations made to them. However, these posts did not receive very many comments but generally were among the most upvoted posts.

As for the dissemination itself, nearly all of the content posted on the pages originated from other platforms such as Telegram or news outlets. This was not a surprising finding since most things on the internet are spread around so much that one will e.g. without a doubt run into the same video on many different platforms. This is also the reason why verifying information on the internet can be extremely difficult.

3.3. The use of language and interactions

In this section I will list a few words and terms I came across the most and add the explanation. This will hopefully create a better understanding about the language used, as well as context to the interactions. All of these words are not exclusive to the subreddits I investigated, so their usage occurs outside of Reddit and their origins are often from elsewhere. Divisive speech can be subtle at times, requiring an understanding of the social context to fully grasp its intent¹⁹.

Language is an extremely important part of a culture. It is the primary way with which people interact with each other, hence, it also carries immense power. The influence that words can have is uniquely portrayed in anonymous conversations on the internet.

- **ORCS/ORKS** = a derogatory term for Russians; a reference to the Orcs in the Lord of The Rings franchise

¹⁹ Vaahensalo, 2021.

- **RUSKY/RUZZKIE/RUZZIAN** = another collection of intended derogatory terms for Russians, derived simply from the word ‘Russian’
- **RUSKI MIR/РУССКИЙ МИР/RUSSKIY MIR/PAX RUSSICA** = a term for the concept of the political and cultural authority of Russia; heavily implies sentiments of nationalism and neo-sovietism
- **PINK MIST** = refers to the splatter of blood that occurs when someone is shot

The threads of conversations were often filled with people making jokes. They were usually made at the expense of the Russians, and mainly consisted of puns. The context of the photos or videos that inspired such jokes were, more often than not, brutal and graphic.

I will list a few examples of interactions between users on the subreddits, then analyse the context and subsequent use of language in the comments. This first example was in the comment section of a video depicting a Russian soldier who was blown up by a mine. At the time, it was a post with a lot of engagement from users based on the number of comments and upvotes the post itself had received:

“The cameraman was thinking about what to do - but he was stumped.” (anonymous11)

“Welp, folks are gonna have to work hard if they wanna get leg up on a comment like that.”
(anonymous12)

“His comrade didn’t have a leg to stand on.” (anonymous13)

This kind of communication serves the purpose of creating cohesion within the community. The speech and use of language in this interaction, and others alike, creates an atmosphere of “us” versus “them”. A separation like this is inevitable since the concept of “us” cannot exist without it creating a “them”. This dichotomy is a key part in the phenomena of othering as described by the OODT²⁰. In one instance, a user tried to break the community norm of othering by showing compassion towards a wounded Russian soldier. This situation also prompted a response from another user:

²⁰ Vaahensalo, 2021.

“Damn that poor guy!

I really feel for him!

What a way to go out.

To be sent to steal land for Putin and his rich friends! If he survives this will change his life forever” (anonymous14)

*“Gets downvoted for showing compassion for another human suffering. What a world we live in”
(anonymous15)*

This interaction was one of only a few of such cases that I observed where anyone went against the grain, and tried to show more objectivity and understanding, as opposed to the immediate hate and dehumanisation, which was the case most of the time. Anonymous15 even replied to the comment highlighting that the double standards in place in the communities are baffling. Indeed, the comment anonymous14 posted received so many downvotes that the numbers were in the negative.

Orcs was the first and the most notable of the new names and terms I encountered in the subreddits. It was used throughout all three communities, however, its usage was most prevalent in r/Ukraine and r/UkraineWarVideoReport. As I briefly explained, the name is intended to be used in a derogatory manner against Russians, especially the soldiers. The following comment was picked from r/Ukraine under a post about a Russian T-80BVM tank getting destroyed by a Ukrainian drone.

“Thanks, was wondering what this final ork message meant.

They are driving Lada in Russian heaven now, with as much potato to drink as they want [praying hands emoji]” (anonymous16)

This comment brought a few things forward. Firstly, it provides an example of the usage of the name Orc. It was not always used in the context of simple name calling and insulting, it has more seemingly evolved to be synonymous with the word Russian. That by no means takes away the hurtful and demeaning weight behind the word, nonetheless, the actual way it is being used in

everyday speech in the communities is more mundane. It has evolved from an insult to a synonym. Secondly, the comment contains stereotypes and the perpetuation of them. Saying that a Russian is driving a Lada (a Russian car brand) while drinking plenty of “potato drink” (vodka), is clearly a great generalisation of the Russian people. This kind of “casual stereotyping” is once again, a part of the process of othering and creating a difference between “us” and “them”.

In the same way as orcs, **ruzzians** and all its different variations, was a term that consistently appeared in the comment sections of all the subreddits. It has also become synonymous with the word “Russian”, though with much more clarity as to what it refers to than the term “orcs”. The appearance of the letter Z stems from its use as a Russian military symbol. One example of this word was under a video showing a Russian soldier hiding under a tank from a Ukrainian drone, but eventually losing his life:

“Ruski was camping.....” (anonymous)

Ruski mir was a prevalent part of the conversations in the comment sections but it was not as commonly used as Orcs. I did see it on all the subreddits as well but mostly on r/UkraineWarVideoReport. The following interaction is from said subreddit under pictures of destroyed parts of the Eastern city of Bakhmut, Ukraine:

“*Ruski mir*” (anonymous17)

“*what I love about ‘mir’ is that it has two meanings: ‘World’ and ‘Peace’. Both are fitting.*”
(anonymous18)

This phrase, or concept, had a noteworthy difference to the rest of the listed examples, in the way it was used. Typically, if I saw the words ruski mir, it was not included in a lengthy comment or a conversation. It was almost exclusively used as a stand-alone statement. In fact, this reply from anonymous18 was one of the only times I noted that a “ruski mir -comment” received any kind of written response. The people in the communities seemed to only interact with these comments

by upvoting them. The response from anonymous18, however, provided interesting and useful new information into the variable meaning the phrase can truly have.

I came across the term **pink mist** a handful of times during the research and it was mostly on the r/UkraineWarVideoReport subreddit, from which the next example is from. This interaction took place under a video showing six Russian soldiers in a crater, in the ground, getting killed by a Ukrainian missile:

*“You mean is that uhhh, you mean that is the pink mist? Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh
dammmmmmmmmmmmn”* (anonymous19)

*“There were six dudes in the fox hole before the explosion.
After... not so many.”* (anonymous20)

I had heard of the term before but I had not seen the actual effect it had been named after, before I saw this post. Based on the comment made by anonymous19, it seemed like it was the user’s first time seeing it too and in the comment section overall, most people were talking about the effect they had now witnessed, even though they had been similarly familiar with the concept. This was one such instance where the majority of the comments were not comprised of jokes. Most were either trying to process what they had seen, or they were discussing the logistics of such a thing actually happening in the battlefield. Although the post was not comfortable to view, it was interesting to see an example where the users were more serious, trying to rationalise the event, and not making jokes as much at the opposite side’s expense. Although not surprisingly, no condolences or sympathies were extended to the six who had, in essence, been evaporated in a second.

4. Effects

The content disseminated online of the Russo-Ukrainian war has created communities around it, with noticeable features across the three subreddits I chose. The subreddits did have clear

differences in their approach to hosting such content on their pages, which is partly why I chose them. However, across all three, these next effects and features were observable: dehumanisation, censorship of any remotely pro-Russian narratives, reactionary behaviours and the many instances of othering which in turn strengthens the community norms.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines dehumanisation as: “to remove from a person the special human qualities of independent thought, feeling for other people, etc.”²¹. A big part of the mental process of dehumanisation is social cognition. Social cognition includes the ability to consider the other as human worth of moral treatment by recognising their mind²². So, a lack in this process, or the complete absence of it, is what is thought to be a major contributor to some individuals failing to consider the other as human. When this failure in cognition happens, often negative feelings such as disgust, are present. The primary function of disgust appears to be its role in prompting avoidance of potentially harmful substances or situations, however, the prerequisite for effective avoidance lies in the initial recognition and identification of the material²³. Anonymous online discussions provide the perfect environment for such events to take place that lead to the act of dehumanisation. Discussions happening via the internet places the individuals so far apart from each other and their realities that such phenomena are not unlikely. I believe the next example from r/Ukraine serves as an adequate representation of the attitude the users of these subreddits had towards gruesome content. This comment was under photos posted from the Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine, where Russian artillery had destroyed civilian buildings:

“Put photo’s with corpse’s, not the rubble shit, who the fuck post pictures like this when already confirmed it’s at least 49 people dead?” (anonymous)

As previously mentioned, the subreddits did consistently provide instances showing the lack of moderation on their pages. However, the act of censorship was practised widely. Moderation and censorship do not carry the same meaning. They might often be used interchangeably but there is an important difference to note. Oxford Language defines moderation as: “the avoidance of

²¹ The Cambridge Dictionary, 2024.

²² Harris, Fiske, 2011.

²³ Scrivner, 2021.

excess or extremes, especially in one's behaviour or political opinions." or "the action of making something less extreme, intense, or violation.", and censorship as: "the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security."²⁴. In the definitions, moderation is described as an "avoidance" whereas censorship is described as a "prohibition".

Even though it was called moderation on the Reddit site, I would argue the practice that actually takes place in the subreddits is closer to censorship. The rules on each subreddit were very clear about the consequences of posting anything remotely "pro-Russian"; the user who did it, would unequivocally get banned and the post would be removed. A major conflict between countries like this will obviously result in some harsher regulations than normal, so it is no surprise that these communities based around Ukraine and Ukrainian culture would be more cautious about what is posted on their pages, as to not endanger their culture any more than it already is. This, however, occurs at the cost of full transparency and objectivity. Without them, an echo chamber will form, which will result in the members only being surrounded by opinions they themselves have expressed, one way or another.

5. Conclusion

I did not expect to spend the majority of the time during research, shifting through negative and hateful comments. Of course, it is a well-known unfortunate fact, that the forum sites on the internet often attract the most negative opinions. The online world and its anonymity provide a perfect protection for some individuals to say their truest dark opinions, and often this leads to them creating online communities filled with like-minded people. This obviously does occur with anything that people might have a common interest in, however, some of them are more dangerous and harmful than others. Even though the process was not what I had expected it to be, I cannot deny the value of researching darker subjects, regardless of how uncomfortable it might be to be in such environments for extended periods of time.

²⁴ Oxford Languages, 2024.

Besides the OODT, there were not many available previous studies or scientific articles that would have directly helped me in the process of writing this dissertation, therefore, I relied a substantial amount on studies in the field of psychology to more adequately provide insight as to why people behave in the ways they do and the physiological processes behind such actions.

I believe further research into online communities and how people interact with gruesome media within them, would be greatly beneficial not only to the understanding of these virtual spaces, but how these individuals are affected by such constant streams of dark content. It would also be interesting to research how this kind of speech and use of language translates into the real world, and if the lines between the virtual and the real are possibly progressively fading.

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