

Ambient Propaganda: Tuning-in to WarTok During Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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This article examines the phenomenon of apparently grassroots, K'remlin-supporting TikTokers in the early days following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. We analyze how they *tune-in* to the platform's personalized algorithm as well as to the prevalent mood of neo-imperialist aggression and resentment in Russian politics and society. We develop and employ the concept of *ambient propaganda* through a case study of a TikTok content creator who aligns herself with the Russian military symbol "Z." In dialogue with recent and classic scholarship on the relationship between ideology and subjectivity, we theorize the persistence of propaganda in media environments where the difference between influencer culture and propagandistic messaging blurs. As contemporary conceptualizations of power have grown increasingly decentralized, we argue for a *multidirectional* conception of propaganda as being driven by intricate processes of attunement and synchronization, the analysis of which is not served by classic notions of authenticity and intentionality.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, ambient media, propaganda, authenticity, influencer culture, TikTok, interpellation, subjectification, asignification

Vibing with "Z"

During the first days of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, a perplexing trend emerged, sparking debates among pundits and commentators about the ideological underpinnings and propagandistic strategies of Russia's aggressive regime. Initially seen spray-painted as a military symbol on Russian tanks crossing the Ukrainian border, the letter "Z" soon began appearing in Russian-language social media—particularly on TikTok—until the platform eventually restricted Russian users from uploading

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Date submitted: 2024-04-02

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² This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 949918-CONSPIRATORIALMEMORY).

new content. Illustrative of the trend was a TikTok video shared on March 4 by a teenage Russian micro-influencer called "Mademoiselle Fluff:"³ Moving her body to the catchy hook of the hip hop track "Bandana," she raised her manicured fingers to the camera, to make a "Z" shaped gang sign. Similar expressions of support for Russian troops in Ukraine emerged from many other female influencer accounts (Figure 1), mirroring clips posted by soldiers in the field, who were themselves riffing on the "Z" theme. The Romanized version of the Cyrillic letter "з,"—the latter found in the Russian word "za" ("for")—began trending inexplicably as a symbol endorsing a spectrum of patriotic causes: "for truth," "for victory," and "for Putin," to list only a few of the "Z"-related hashtags circulating in the pro-Kremlin sections of TikTok during what some were labeling "the world's first TikTok war" (Chayka, 2022, para. 2).

Founded in 2016, TikTok has rapidly become one of the world's most widely used platforms, surpassing Twitter/X and Instagram (Sukhanova, 2023). In Russia, prior to the restrictions, the platform was reportedly used by 46% of the population aged 16–64 (Shadijanova, 2022). Russia's post-invasion war against Ukraine has been dubbed the first "TikTok War" by commentators, due to the platform's widespread use by both civilians and combatants. Users shared short videos—often under a minute long—featuring scenes such as missiles flying overhead, sometimes set with "breathtaking incongruity," to snippets of trending pop music (cf. Chayka, 2022, para. 1.). Within weeks of the invasion, TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, followed other major social media platforms in implementing strict content moderation policies in Russia. Afterward, users could access only old Russian-made clips, as new Russian content was blocked (Milmo, 2022). Despite these restrictions, the platform continued to face frequent accusations of "cashing-in" (Visser, Smirnova, & Martiny, 2023) on pro-Kremlin propaganda (cf. O'Connor, 2022).

TikTok's motto "real people, real videos" speaks to a cherished aesthetic of authenticity, which at first would appear far removed from the clumsy machinations of a state-sanctioned propaganda campaign, or what social media platforms content moderators tend to refer to as "inauthentic behavior" (Weedon, Nuland, & Stamos, 2017). As such, the point of this article—as with the special issue it contributes to, is to rethink authenticity by arguing that the conventional binary may, in fact, lead us to ask the wrong questions.

³ We have changed this content producer's name.

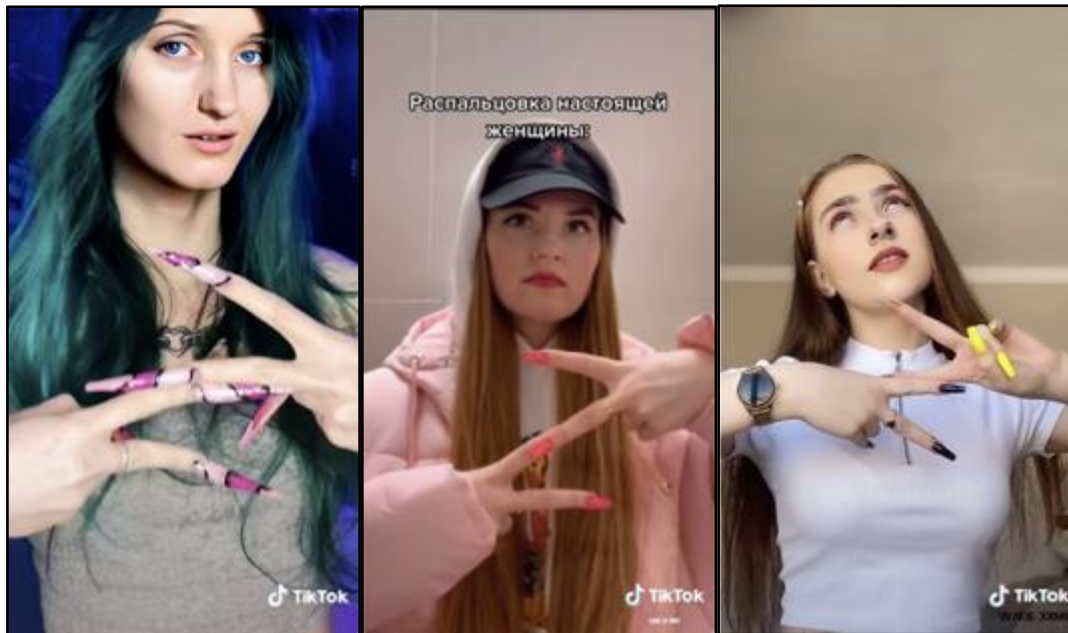


Figure 1. "Z"-Gesture TikTok posts (Pilipets & Geboers, 2024).⁴

To be sure, the "Z" craze—sometimes accompanied by the no less ambiguous letters "V" and "O"—extended beyond the realm of "WarTok." Within weeks of the invasion, the "Z" appeared on a banner behind Putin at a mass rally held at Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow: "За Россию" ("For Russia"). The Russian Ministry of Defense incorporated the "Z" into their promotional imagery. Though not a Cyrillic letter, the symbol seemed aimed at both domestic audiences and "the collective West" (west being "zapad" in Russian)—a term often employed by Kremlin propagandists, who tend to envision Western alliances secretly conspiring against Russia (Borenstein, 2019; Livers, 2020; Yablokov, 2018). As observers grappled with the "Z" craze, it was labeled a novel form of propaganda, a symbol of totalitarianism, on par with the Nazis' use of the Swastika (Sheets, 2022) and presumably "[c]oncocted by the Kremlin's PR teams on the fly" (Garner, 2023, p. 21). However, certainty is elusive in the Russian information space, rendered even more inscrutable by the fog of war. While the Kremlin could have concocted the "Z" symbol, it is equally possible that it was appropriated from social media milieus like TikTok.

As Russian-American journalist M. Gessen (2022) observed, while "totalitarian symbols are usually created at the top... 'Z' is a different animal, a ready-made symbol picked up by a society that has already reconstituted itself as totalitarian" (para. 6). Maintaining ambiguity regarding "Z"'s origins and intentions, Gessen (2022) illuminates two points that are pivotal to our analysis: Firstly, the "Z" trend, while used for propagandistic purposes, is different from top-down 20th-century cases of propaganda in that it seems to have simultaneously emerged in official channels and low-key, civilian-driven initiatives; secondly, the

⁴ From the dataset collected by Pilipets and Geboers (2024). Anonymized using AI prompts to generate new faces.

immediate and fervent adoption of the “Z” by substantial segments of Russian society stemmed from “years of ideological, aesthetic, and even spiritual movement-shaping” (para. 6).

As other observers have highlighted, the Russian government, particularly since Putin’s third-term leadership, has consistently fostered an atmosphere of national self-righteousness and militant outrage. This mood has included state-fanned resentment over the collapse of the Soviet Union and a self-congratulatory glorification of the Soviet victory over Nazism—both harnessed to promote patriotic rallying around the flag (Sharafutdinova, 2020; Tolz & Teper, 2018). Against this backdrop, the “Z”—rather than introducing a new narrative or political stance—validated and activated a long-simmering mood of resentful nationalist aggression, which, since the 2010s, has become increasingly entangled with youth culture and “[c]loaked in internet memes and trends” (Garner, 2023, p. 95). These insights offer a distinct lens on the “Z”-themed TikToks. If they are to be labeled propaganda, they represent a novel, less top-down, and more participatory form of propagandistic messaging tailored to the affordances of the new digital media environment—specifically, TikTok’s viral dance craze and sound meme formats, which are designed to promote imitative behavior (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Here, we draw inspiration from the visionary 19th-century sociologist Gabriele Tarde’s (1903) theories on “the laws of imitation,” reflections that have acquired renewed relevance in post-structural social theory and in light of recent innovations in communication technology (Candea, 2010; Tonkonoff, 2017). Meanwhile, we situate the Russian “Z” posts in a wider recent scholarly effort to unmoor the concept of propaganda from its legacy media associations, recalibrating it for a period of participatory and imitative social media. By enabling all accounts, regardless of the number of *followers*, to participate in dance crazes, lip-synching, and duets, TikTok redefines *influencer culture*, which may be its greatest innovation. While it is common to periodize the present as an “age of influence” (Mathewson, 2023), scholars still tend to think of it in mid-twentieth terms of opinion leaders interpreting mass media messages for their audiences (cf. Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Using a pro-Kremlin WarTok account as a case study, in what follows, we conceptualize the decentering of unidirectional influence through what we term *ambient propaganda*.

Propaganda has been defined as “[c]ommunication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behaviour compliant with political goals of the propagandist” (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018, p. 40). Such perspectives rely not only on concepts of intentionality (“designed to”) and unidirectionality (“target population”), but also on notions of (in)authenticity, as propaganda, at least in its traditional understanding, is closely associated with attempts to “mislead or manipulate” (Auerbach & Castronovo, 2013, p. 6). A major methodological challenge for propaganda research then comes in distinguishing “between orchestrated, explicitly coordinated, information operations and the emergent, organic behaviors of an online crowd” (Starbird, Arif, & Wilson, 2019, p. 127:5). This focus, in turn, plays into social media content moderators’ objective to rid their platforms of perspectives and actions deemed “inauthentic” (Weedon et al., 2017). However, recent scholarship has begun to question the efficacy of several key communications studies notions—including propaganda’s status as inorganic—when contending with the 21st-century context of “disrupted public spheres” (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 243). This article contributes to this revision.

To explain what we mean by *ambient*, it is instructive to recall Tony Schwartz's (1973) once famous and now mostly forgotten "resonant theory of communication," which argued that the so-called transportation model of communication needed to be revised in an era of information abundance. Schwartz (1973) envisioned communication as an interactive process of resonating "chords," by which experiences already "stored" in audiences (p. 25) were evoked in the communication process, with "listening habits interact[ing] with stored experiences to create a perceptual resonance that attunes us to receive certain messages in certain ways" (p. 28). Rooted in an auditory metaphor, this model conceptualizes communication less as the delivery of information than as a reciprocal process of *attunement*, where the *receiver* can be understood as *tuning-in* to a signal that somehow "speaks" to them—or in more youth-cultural colloquial terms, that they *vibe with*. Relatedly, James Carey (1992) once described such a dynamic as a ritualistic type of communication situation, "in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed" (p. 16).

Building on this provocation, we examine how media-theoretical reinterpretations of Michel Foucault's and Louis Althusser's concepts can offer specific insights into the dynamics of subject formation, particularly in understanding how propaganda persists "after decentralization" (Galloway, 2004). Here, intentionality is elusive (Auerbach & Castronovo, 2013, p. 10), and agency is not an inherent property, but emerges from discrete relations (or affordances) within an ambient environment. We argue that this ambient model recasts apparent communication pathologies—such as propaganda, conspiracy theories, and various forms of mis- and disinformation—not as anomalies but as pervasive features of media environments. These environments, much like cultures of "orality" (Venturini, 2022), derive validation through repetition. We explore this dynamic further through our case study of Kremlin-supporting TikTokers during the invasion's early days. We scrutinize how they tune-in to the platform's algorithm, their audiences, and the prevailing mood of aggression and resentment in Russian politics and society.

Our theorization of an ambient logic at work in "Z"-themed propaganda shifts attention away from a unidirectional concept of influence (as either artificially orchestrated or authentic) towards theorizing dynamics of imitation that are at once more relational and *multidirectional*. Our gambit is that, while conventional, top-down propaganda remains a problem, ambient media environments like TikTok introduce a new recursive problematic, where the subject of propaganda is continually reconstituted through a dynamic interplay with platform logics. On TikTok, propaganda and influencer culture easily blur into one another, with propaganda proliferating through the imitative affordances built into the platform—what the media theorist Douglas Rushkoff (2022) refers to as its "mimetic entrainment" (ch. 12, para. 32)—making propaganda practically indistinguishable from any other type of trending content. We conceive of mimetic entrainment as relating to Guattari's (2010) concept of semiotic and machinic "enslavement," which refers to how our subjectivity is interpellated by the machines with which we interact. Yet the notion of entrainment proposed here implies a greater degree of agency than "enslavement" suggests. Rather than relying on "sheep-like acts of conformity" (Katrak Spencer, 2023, p. 74), it involves an active, ongoing imitative process of calibrating and synchronizing one's body with the rhythms of musical and performative memes, which themselves are in constant flux and evolution—where the notion of *rhythm* constitutes a mode of relating to oneself and one's environment (Abraham & Torok, 1995).

While the actual origins of the “Z” meme, as well as the motivations of its various performers, remain obscure, labeling these posts as inauthentic misses the mark, as they were not essentially different from any other craze spreading across the platform at that moment, from sea shanties to drone dancing. In an important sense, the imitative dynamics of “Z” memes exceed the logic of signification, bringing propaganda into dialogue with an emerging “asignifying” communication regime (Guattari, 2010, p. 51), where “instead of constituting a higher modality[...] speech interacts directly with other forms of expression (ritual, gestural, musical, productive, etc.)” (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 69). Indeed, insofar as it conveys nothing concrete or persuasive, “Z” is a textbook example of a *floating signifier*. Its dynamism derives from its semiotic openness, which evokes rather than denotes a loose conglomerate of patriotic signifieds, causes, and talking points. Its vitality also derives from how it invites users’ relational encounters with and within the digital environments where “Z” circulates. Framing these encounters as ambient, we emphasize the role of complex assemblages of signs and machines in the production of subjectivity or subjectification in the service of propaganda (Lazzarato, 2014; Turner, 2013). Through this framing, we draw attention to a co-constitutive dynamic between the medium, its *ambiances*, and its users. In other words, the *significance* of “Z” is an open-ended, often performative, negotiation with its possible meanings, resisting binary conceptual framework intent on categorizing subjects and messages as either authentic or inauthentic.

Ambient Propaganda

In 2013, the editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies* noted that “the study of propaganda does not neatly fit a conventional communications model that posits a producer at one end, a receiver at the other, and a message in the middle” (Auerbach & Castronovo, 2013, p. 10). Researchers have since acknowledged that the relationship between propaganda strategists and their target audiences is rarely one of unidirectional, top-down imposition. Even in authoritarian contexts, propagandists typically gauge prevailing opinions, grievances, and beliefs among their audiences. They understand that “reinforcing and sharpening” (Welch, 2021, p. 29) existing dispositions is more efficient than attempting to radically shift collective opinion. Similarly, Harold Lasswell (1951), in his early analysis of Soviet propaganda, observed how it sought to align the public’s “sentiments and assumptions,” although he also characterized this dynamic as essentially “a one-way affair” (p. 70).

Lately, scholars have expanded on this insight, exploring the diverse mechanisms that regulate the interactions between the top-down, state-led forces of propagandistic persuasion and grassroots forms of agency and self-fashioning. Advocating for a more horizontal understanding, Auerbach and Castronovo (2013) argue that “[p]eople can actively use propaganda and are not simply passive dupes used by it” (p. 9). Of relevance here is the scholarship on (self-)censorship in post-communist contexts, as theorized through a Foucauldian lens of micro-power, that both restricts and shapes the subject’s freedom (Schimpfössl, Yablokov, Zeveleva, Fedirko, & Bajomi-Lazar, 2020). Similarly, research on the Russian-sponsored news outlet RT reveals an interplay between top-down pro-Kremlin information strategy and more subtle processes of internalization whereby journalists, both Russian and foreign, come to adopt the outlet’s interpretive reflexes, many of which have roots in late-Soviet propaganda paradigms (Kuznetsova, 2023).

The rise of social media networks has further boosted interest in these more horizontal dimensions of propaganda. Their research suggests that the current digital landscape has revolutionized propaganda, allowing it to operate by "other means" (Boler & Davis, 2021), and specifically in ways that are more "participatory" (Wanless & Berk, 2020), "networked" (Benkler et al., 2018), "computational" (Woolley & Howard, 2018), "collaborative" (Starbird et al., 2019), and even "3.0" (Hyzen, 2023). Common users, enhanced by algorithms and forms of automation, play an active role in the creation, curation, "amplification" (DiResta, 2018), and distribution of propaganda. This literature is essential for rethinking how the persuasive and deceptive strategies of authoritarian regimes relate to other agential forces (algorithms, platforms, and online crowds) and especially to the participatory dynamics of social media. Yet, cultural theorist Christopher Till (2021) argues that although these newer theoretical frameworks "clearly identify the novelty of the methods used in digital propaganda, their analysis is broadly consistent with the 20th-century 'broadcast' model" (p. 1364). Till's (2021) argument aligns with our criticism. He emphasized that studies of online propaganda have not adequately acknowledged the extent to which social media platforms are designed to facilitate a logic of imitation. He conceptualizes this imitative logic as regressive conformity and as a fundamental law underpinning all sociality. This relationality complicates the seeming linearity of propaganda and calls for further conceptual frameworks that reflect the socio-technical innovations of the contemporary media landscape.

We must pause to note that most recent academic efforts (apart from Till, 2021, who conceptually privileges imitation over manipulation) to update the academic understanding of propaganda to the 21st-century media environment appear to hang onto one defining aspect: that a direct and deliberate line of influence and intent can be drawn from the sender to the receiver of propaganda. As such, from its twentieth-century origins in the inter-war period to its present-day reassessment, conceptions of propaganda are anchored in the premise of an intentional agent with the objective to manipulate. While underscoring the slipperiness of concepts of intention within contemporary networked forms of power, we do not rule out the possibility that top-down manipulative intentionality is at work in our object(s) of analysis. We do, however, start with the conviction that the study of certain forms of contemporary propaganda benefits from suspending questions of intentionality and authenticity. Put more strongly, the inability to identify intentionality at work, or to distinguish authentic from manipulated online behavior, is precisely what makes this kind of propaganda effective and concerning. With intentionality posing a challenge to various methodological perspectives, recent research (cf. Till, 2021) seeks to reorient analysis towards the propagation mechanisms of imitation and "repetition-with-variation" (Hagen & Venturini, 2023) that seem to propel the online attention economy.

We believe that the metaphor of *ambience* serves this theoretical reconsideration of propaganda, particularly for analyzing the WarTok "Z" meme. Commonly used as an adjective in sound studies and associated with a form of listening that involves different levels of attention, the concept has been taken up in media and cultural studies, for example, by Paul Roquet and Laurent Berlant, who, respectively, observe the historical emergence of an ambient mode of "subjectivation" (Roquet, 2016, p. 9) or "citizenship" (Berlant, 2011, p. 230). Roquet (2016) uses the metaphor of ambience to rethink the entangled relationship between political subjectivity and an enveloping type of media experience, while Berlant (2011) frames the ambient as "a space of abeyance" to neoliberalism's norms (p. 242). Thomas Rickert (2013), in turn, has sought to update classical conceptions of rhetoric for what he calls the contemporary "age of ambience" in

which boundaries “dissolve” between “subject and object, human and nonhuman, and information and matter” (p. 1). In seeing rhetoric as one of the key “modalities for attunement to the world” (Rickert, 2013, p. xviii), his argument aligns with Roquet’s (2016) idea of a mode of subjectivity deeply entangled with its material (media) environment. Rickert’s (2013) notion of ambient rhetoric is helpful in rethinking the alignment of intent between a sender and receiver of propaganda in terms of a reciprocal process of tuning-in, or what we might also think of as *vibing with*. More concretely, Internet linguist Michel Zappavigna (2011) has developed the concept of “ambient affiliation” to describe new types of social constellations afforded by social media platforms, where users—who likely do not know each other and may not interact again—come to see themselves as participants in communities where the floating signifier of a hashtag, for example #Z, forms a “gravitational field” (p. 801).

To close this subsection with a preliminary conclusion, we advocate incorporating the concept of ambient media into the propaganda studies toolkit. What we call ambient propaganda is less a matter of transmission of (messages, ideas, arguments, etc.) than attunement to and resonance with (vibes, rhythms, affective moods, etc.). It may be provisionally defined as communication that aligns both with propagandists’ goals to manipulate target populations and platforms’ incentivization logics, yet whose appeal derives not just from the message or instigating agent, but from a recursive process of attunement between content, platforms, and users. Thus, as a non-linear musical metaphor, ambience spotlights the more fine-grained, imitative, affective, and immersive relations between subjects and media, including how users resonate with propagandistic milieus, rather than passively receiving their unidirectional messages. As evinced by the Kremlin’s communication around its war against Ukraine, top-down attempts to shape popular views and behaviors—often relying on the targets’ own (online) amplification and dissemination activities—are by no means a thing of the past. However, new social media environments also facilitate more multidirectional dynamics, best understood through a model of ambience. Crucially, our notion of ambience underscores how imitative subjectification emerges from the (embodied, affective, participatory) relations with specific social media milieus, an insight that defies the postulate of propaganda’s linear vectors of intentionality. In the next section, we proceed from our conceptual framing to a case study of WarTok’s “Z” culture.

Syncing with “Z”: The Case of *RussianQuinn*

TikTok is fundamentally different from other major social media platforms in that content is recommended based on the platform’s analysis of users’ behavior—as opposed, for example, to content produced by friends and followers or by other accounts that users follow. By modeling users’ behavior, the platform *targets* recommendations for each individual user, which appear on their very own ForYouPage. Although efforts have been made to audit TikTok’s personalized algorithm, its technical functioning remains obscure (cf. Boeker & Urman, 2022). Nevertheless, a subset of recent scholarship has convincingly framed the platforms’ much-discussed *addictiveness* in terms of the dynamics of “intensity, sensation, and liveliness,” or what media theorists call “networked affect” (Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit, 2015, p. 13). Similarly, Zulli and Zulli (2022) convincingly argue that TikTok has managed to channel “mimesis as the basis of sociality on the site” (p. 1873), Grandinetti and Bruinsma (2023), who frame TikTok’s algorithmic personalization in terms of harnessing “prepersonal intensities,” including those facilitating the circulation of “mis(dis)information” (p. 6). Similarly, Pilipets and Geboers (2024) argue that TikTok sound memes

connect users *transversally*, below the level of signification, thus providing a basis for new kinds of “embodied networked propaganda” (p. 157).

Our case study's empirical method was developed in dialogue with the work of Pilipets and Geboers (2024). In March 2022, we scraped a dataset of TikTok posts ($n = 1,655$) featuring the lyrics and melody of a Stalin-era patriotic march, “Sacred War” [Священная война]. Composed days after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union and broadcast daily across Soviet radio from October 1941 onward, the song became a mobilizing anthem for the defense of the fatherland and an aural icon of mid-20th-century propaganda revived in the Putin era.⁵ To examine how influencers tune-in to the multi-directional dynamics of contemporary ambient propaganda, we selected RussianQuinn (Валькирия, 2022)—the account in our dataset with the largest following—for qualitative analysis, reviewing her full archive of posts ($n = 676$). This case foregrounds continuity with 20th-century information campaigns as well as a new ambient dynamics shaped by specific platform affordances.⁶

Recalling our opening anecdote of Mademoiselle Fluf performing the “Z” hand gesture, RussianQuinn (Валькирия, 2022) boasts a significantly larger following (over 1 million versus 17,000 followers). Although arguably engaging with the war more directly than the hand-gesture clips, RussianQuinn's posts share a lack of a detailed or coherent narrative about the war or explicit justifications in line with those of Kremlin. On her account, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is only one focal point among a broad spectrum of more mundane and less politically charged posts. What ties RussianQuinn's diverse videos together is her consistent display of hyper-feminine behavior and aesthetics, often enhanced with filters to refine her appearance and lending a whimsical, almost cartoonish quality to her content. A glance at her account's archive reveals frequent performances of “cute” dances, lip-syncs to catchy songs, and a penchant for quasi-folkloristic attire, all of which provide a seemingly neutral, even innocent, backdrop for her occasional war-themed messaging.

On February 24, 2022, her first war-related posts performed a seemingly apolitical grief. In one video, she lip-syncs the song that served as Russia's 2021 submission to the Eurovision Song Festival, its lyrics bemoaning the transhistorical plight of Russian women. In another (Figure 2, on the left), she looks teary-eyed into the camera, with a Russian flag painted on one cheek and an Ukrainian flag on the other. Rather than pacifism, however, she conveys a rendition of female suffering and resilience. As with so many of her other videos, in these clips, RussianQuinn meticulously brings her facial expressions, make-up, and lip movements *in-sync* with the memes and vibes moving across the platform at that moment. Two days

⁵ As evinced by example the march's controversial 2007 performance by the Russian army's Alexandrov Ensemble at NATO headquarters in Brussels, and a commemorative plaque installed in 2005 marking the song's first 1941 performance at Moscow's Belorussky station (Foliev, 2016).

⁶ The original TikTok account (Валькирия, 2022) and the individual posts analyzed in this article are no longer publicly accessible. Since April 2025, the influencer has operated a new account (@russianquinn_new), where the profile description reads, “Let's start from the beginning... Let's get my 1.2 million followers back” (Валькирия, 2025). Accordingly, references to RussianQuinn throughout this article refer to material collected and archived by the authors from the original account during their 2023 data collection.

later, after trying out a completely different type of content where she dresses in a tight-fitting Pikachu suit (Figure 2, in the middle), she returns to war-themed content. Having received hate from both Ukraine and Russia supporters, she seems to feel the urge to explain herself: "I'm Russian, but I don't consider Ukrainians to be our enemies!" a Russian text reads in her clip (Валькирия, 2022). "As in most nations," it continues, "there's a part of the population (nationalists) who indeed deserve what they're receiving now. But overall, I'm for [Ukrainian flag] and [Russian flag]" (Валькирия, 2022).



Figure 2. RussianQuinn (Валькирия, 2022).

In her videos of the following days, however, RussianQuinn increasingly *attunes* her performances to the symbols, phrases, and melodies of pro-Kremlin "Z" culture. The Ukrainian flags disappear, replaced by Russian flags painted in heart shapes on her cheeks (28 February); praise for Vladimir Putin (in words and images) begins to appear in her posts ("I'm proud to be Russian, proud of our country, proud of our president!"; Валькирия, 2022). In these videos, cultural references to the Second World War also grow increasingly prominent. On February 28, she appears in front of the camera in the military uniform of a World War II-era Soviet soldier, a red Soviet star adorning her side cap with the (post-Soviet) Russian flag still displayed on her cheek (Figure 2, on the right). She produced roughly a dozen variations of this (historically eclectic) performance over the next three days, each time lip-syncing and moving her body to another patriotically themed Soviet or Russian song, ranging from war-time classics like "Katyusha" to glamorous post-Soviet *estrada* pop. Compared with her earlier videos, this content gained the most views. Exemplary here is a post from 6 March 2022 in which RussianQuinn dons her Red Army uniform and lip-syncs to "Sacred War" (the TikTok sound meme that led to our selection of this account for close-up analysis). The specific performance of the Soviet march in her clip opens with a snippet from the famous 1941 radio announcement by Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Viacheslav Molotov, delivered just hours after Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa: "Our case is just, the enemy will be defeated, victory will be

ours!” And then, while RussianQuinn salutes to the camera, the army choir erupts in thunderous chants: “Arise, vast country! Arise for the deadly battle, against the dark fascist force, against the accursed horde!” (Валькирия, 2022).



Figure 3. WWII live action role playing (LARPing) on TikTok (Валькирия, 2022; posts anonymized using AI).⁷

Tellingly, among RussianQuinn's war-related posts, those aligned with the state-backed symbolism of Soviet-imperial nostalgia—the red star, the commitment to the “vast country,” the sacralized memory of World War II—are by far the most popular, receiving up to a hundred times more views than her early double-flag videos and ten times more than her Pikachu clips. Meanwhile, her videos in Soviet uniform were by no means original. They performatively replicated a formulaic WarTok trend (Figure 3) in which Russian girls, often displaying the “Z” on their faces or attire, impersonated saluting Soviet soldiers or alternatively transitioned within the span of the short clip, from contemporary post-Soviet teenagers into stern Red Army combatants. Certainly, RussianQuinn's videos could be set aside either as state-backed (or even state-planned) propaganda, or a relatively inconsequential viral meme culture, which unwittingly aligns with a targeted propaganda campaign.⁸ We argue that neither of these explanations grasps the dynamics at work in this case nor, for that matter, in the more general phenomenon of “Z” culture. As with the smaller-scale TikTok accounts displaying the “Z”-shaped hand gesture, what is significant here is that RussianQuinn's

⁷ The two images on the right have been anonymized using AI prompts to generate new faces.

⁸ Interestingly, RussianQuinn started her TikTok account on the same day as the Russian military invasion of Ukraine (her Instagram, by contrast, goes back to August 2017). While this might support an interpretation of RussianQuinn as an *agent of influence*, it would seem to be of such a variety as to call for a different understanding of how propaganda replicates in personalized and mimetic digital environments.

embodied movements and expressions are synchronized with the retrograde symbols and revanchist sentiments associated with pro-Kremlin attitudes. More specifically, her performance is attuned to—even if it does not explicitly articulate—the Kremlin’s central narrative that Russia’s population is again, as it was in Soviet times, rising against the “dark force of fascism” (Валькирия, 2022).⁹ While such syncing of bodies with propaganda messaging is not new (cf. Le Bon, 1897), what is novel here is how users performatively align their bodies with memes—a process that is not inherently related to politics, let alone propaganda.

Tuning-in to “Z”: Propaganda For You

Not only is RussianQuinn’s carefully curated persona increasingly in-sync with the dominant narratives of the Kremlin, the production of this persona is also deeply entwined with the affordances of the platform. As she tunes in to TikTok’s latest trend, the personalization algorithm *tunes-in to her*. RussianQuinn’s ambient interactions with and on TikTok prompt a reconsideration of the relationship between propaganda and the production of subjectivity. More specifically, her war-themed videos stake up a co-constitutive dynamic between the medium and its user, for which the sender-receiver model, which offers no handholds for understanding how subjects are altered by the exchanges they engage in. As if confirming McLuhan’s (1964) renowned dictum, the meaning is not in the messages, but in how she inhabits the medium or, reversely, how *the medium inhabits her*. In a sense, then, messages trending across the platform pass through her, registering on her persona without necessarily taking hold of it. As McLuhan and Fiore (1967) argued, “media work us over completely [...] they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered” (p. 26). In this sense, we might read the case of RussianQuinn as illustrative of the multidirectional mechanisms of what Thomas Rickert (2013) calls the “age of ambience,” which dissolves the boundaries between “subject and object, human and nonhuman, and information and matter” (p. 1). RussianQuinn’s performative replications of the uniform meme display a double dynamic of synchronization, both with the mimetic affordances of the medium *and* with a set of state-sponsored historical myths, revanchist sentiments, and retrograde symbols. This double synchronization—facilitated by the platform’s imitative logic and benefiting an authoritarian neo-imperialist state—we describe as ambient propaganda.

⁹ Anachronistic references to the Second World War are central to the Kremlin’s conspiratorial efforts to justify their alleged battle against Nazism in Ukraine. In this rhetoric, Noordenbos (2022) argues, “Russia—still/again/always—liberates Europe from the combined evils of Nazism and American-led imperialism” (pp. 1300–1301). In the face of the absence of a Nazi threat, the Kremlin resorts to “conspiratorial memory” (p. 1301), a mix of contemporary conspiracism and historical mythmaking that “explains away the discrepancies between past and present, between what is seen and how it should be interpreted” (p. 1301). Similarly, the Red Army uniform meme circulating on TikTok suggests that under the surface of apparent peace (and notwithstanding the glaring differences between the 1940s and the 2020s), Russia is facing the same fascist threat on its Western borders as it did in 1941, and the country is to act accordingly, even if preemptively. As RussianQuinn (Валькирия, 2022) writes in one of her Red Army uniform posts: “this is the way it was, currently is, and will be [Russian flag].”

Unlike the intentional (if chaotic) disinformation produced by Russian troll farms,¹⁰ it is much harder to locate its source.

Ambient propaganda appears to emerge from an internal dialogue (carried out in public by influencers busily fashioning their online personas) between a subject and *the call of ideology*. Significant in this respect is that RussianQuinn's go-to practice of lip-syncing is often flawed, to say the least. With the image of this influencer's awkward lip-syncing in mind, we argue that what is at stake in this instance of ambient propaganda is not perfect synchronization, but a looping process, whereby her performance and reproduction of "Z"-themed memes may be seen as a "*representation of a reception*" (Dienst, 1994, pp. 141–142, emphasis in original), one that she feeds back into the ambience of WarTok, further attuning her with its environment (affecting her ForYouPage, attracting more views, and fine-tuning the algorithm). This insight is clarified by briefly considering classic scholarship on the topic, specifically by Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, as well as recent revisions of their thoughts in the face of the imitative logic of a platform like TikTok. The transition from 20th-century broadcast media to 21st-century ambient media requires a reconsideration of the nexus between power, intentionality, and subjectivity—as theorized by Foucault. To put it plainly, we claim that propaganda studies have missed the "Foucauldian-turn."

As Paul Roquet (2016) observes, Foucault's later work advanced an essentially *ambient* model of power—one that operates in an indirect and fluid manner, which Foucault described as "an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals" (p. 260). Similarly, we argue that propaganda is not necessarily premised on causal relationships between the propagandist's intent and the behaviors and beliefs of the targeted subjects. Foucault's (1982) late article "The Subject and Power" is insightful, as he explains that the focus of his analyses throughout his career had been "the different modes by which [...] human beings are made subjects" (p. 777). His concept of subjectification has been extensively analyzed in subsequent scholarship, with much attention given to the commonplace everyday practices that subtly align individuals with dominant ideologies—or, as Foucault preferred to frame it, with the operations of power.

What distinguished Foucault's project from earlier influential theorists of subjectification, like Louis Althusser, was the relative autonomy granted to subjects. In Foucault's account, power was at once more pervasive and more permissive, allowing space for individual agency. Advancing an argument that may be seen to anticipate media theoretical discussions of "active audiences" (Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 2003), Foucault insisted that generally "[p]eople know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (Foucault, as cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187)—that is, the effects and severity of their actions on others. Rather than understanding those effects through a generalizable theory (such as "Marxism"), he advocated attention to "the practices, focused in technologies and innumerable separate *localizations*, which literally em-body what the analyst is seeking to understand" (Foucault, as cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187; emphasis added).

¹⁰ Thomas Rid (2020) ascribes the effect of the (otherwise ineffective) 2016 troll factory campaign by the Russian Internet Research Agency primarily to the panicked response in the American press: "mainstream press coverage *generated* the actual effect of a disinformation operation" (p. 408; emphasis in original).

Although Foucault did not write about media, his thoughts on how power becomes “increasingly dispersed and micrological” and functions “beneath the level of personalization and subjecthood” provides an invaluable resource for theorizing a shift to 21st-century “atmospheric media” (Hansen, 2012, pp. 500–501). When studying RussianQuinn as a Foucauldian *subject in the making*, we can consider her ForYouPage to be a particularly significant site of localization. To theorize this final argumentative step, we turn to a media studies’ re-conceptualization of Louis Althusser’s (1971) classic theory of subjectification, from his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Provided that it is updated, we consider such theory essential for understanding the multidirectional dynamics of ambient propaganda, by which a self-styled social media entrepreneur like RussianQuinn comes to *recognize herself* as a subject (in the Althusserian sense). This recognition, we argue, unfolds against the context of what Foucault described as “intentionality without a subject,” that is, a “push towards a strategic objective” where we cannot, however, definitely identify who, if anyone at all, is ultimately responsible for doing the pushing (Foucault, as cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187).

At the center of Althusser’s (1971) famous subjectification theory, often referred to as the interpellation thesis, sits a personalized conception of *ideology* as a dynamic function. According to this theory, domination sustains and reproduces itself via an interactive process that Althusser describes as *hailing*. Subjects are formed at the very moment that they recognize themselves in (and subject themselves to) the hail of the dominant ideology. Althusser (1971) thus introduces an understanding of ideology as a relational practice, reproduced through a process inseparable from subject formation. In a 1994 study, cultural critic Richard Dienst (1994) provocatively adapted Althusser’s interpellation thesis to late-twentieth-century media environments. He starts from the premise that “ideology must be conceived as a *mass of sendings* or a flow of representations whose force consists precisely in the fact that they are not perfectly destined, just as they are not centrally disseminated” (p. 141; emphasis added). Picking up on Althusser’s remark that ideology’s hail “practically never” misses its target (p. 141), Dienst (1994) concludes that it, therefore, *can* miss, which he goes on to read as a constitutive dimension of the theory. Precisely because its call is not flawlessly directed (recall RussianQuinn’s imperfect lip-synching), interpellation requires a multidirectional feedback process, “a short circuit between the singular and the general, so that the *reception of a representation* becomes a sending back—a *representation of a reception*” (Dienst, 1994, pp. 141–142; emphasis in original). In other words, ideological domination essentially sustains itself through a mimetic and reciprocal dynamic that internalizes and sends back an externally generated representation as the basis of the interpellated subject.

Though not equivalent, ideology and propaganda share dynamics that subjectification theory helps illuminate, offering much-needed insight into the loops of imitation and synchronization that underpin some of propaganda’s recent permutations. As we have argued above, on WarTok, imitation plays a central role in a multidirectional process of attunement that cycles between the state-supported patterns of propagandistic discourse, the platform’s algorithm, and a partly overlapping group of content producers/audiences. Already, for Althusser, imitation—that is, the recognition of oneself as the addressee of the call of ideology and the subsequent self-alignment with the roles and positions it prescribes—was at the heart of a process of subject-making. Yet recent scholarship underscores that such an imitative dynamic—especially when it plays out in participatory new media—is no longer structured in unidirectional and centralized fashion. For example, in *Updating to Remain the Same*, Wendy Chun (2017) argues that

"by responding to these calls [...] audiences become imbricated in particular expressive communities and systems of meaning" (p. 123). With WarTok, this *imbrication* functions through the ForYouPage, which presents self-styled influencers, such as RussianQuinn, with an image of themselves that defies binary notions of in/authenticity.

To expand these insights beyond RussianQuinn's case, let us briefly recall where we began: the sudden emergence of the letter "Z"—along with the less prominent "V" and "O"—as puzzling markers of patriotic support for the Kremlin's unprovoked war. In spring 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense began posting on Telegram channel increasing quantities of content featuring the letters, ranging from images of citizens making "Z" or "V" gestures to posters integrating the letters into displays of military might, glorifying the heroism of Russia's "defenders" (Figure 4). Later that summer, new poster designs appeared, incorporating all three letters and rendered in Roman, Cyrillic, or Old Church Slavonic script—the latter lending contemporary Russian soldiers an aura of sanctified moral righteousness. The letters were typically arranged to form ZOV, a phonetic homonym for the Russian word meaning "hail" or "summons" (as in "summons of duty"). These government-disseminated posters might be said to literalize the call emanating from the multidirectional dynamics of ambient propaganda. Regardless of whether these symbols originated as part of a coordinated campaign, Russian officialdom *itself* had by then tuned-in to a patriotic realm of empty signifiers, whose heightened affective charge was accumulated through their circulation across online and offline environments.

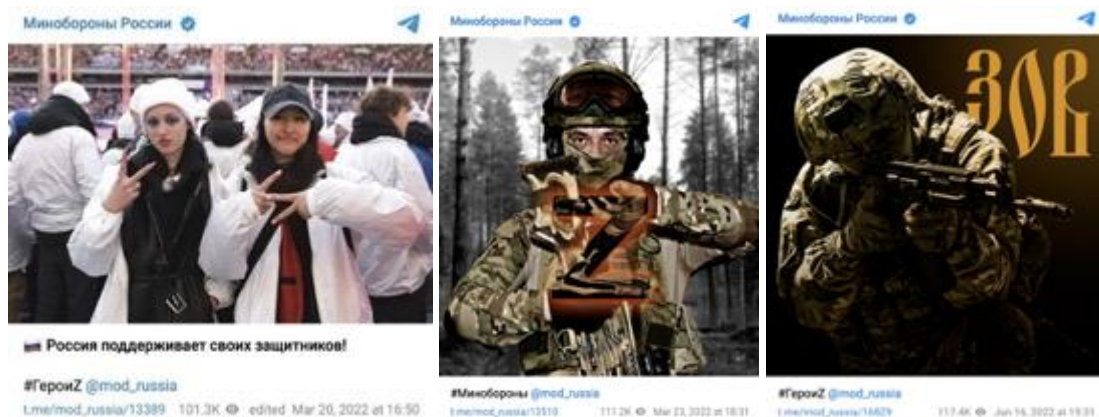


Figure 4. Russian Ministry of Defense (2022a, 2022b, 2022c) Telegram Posts (March and June 2022).

Conclusion: From Influence to Attunement

Ambient modes of propaganda operate not primarily through the transmission of manipulative information, but hinge on an incrementally refined interplay between individuals, media environments, and authoritarian actors vibing or synching with, or tuning-in to one another—a set of dynamics that we collectively refer to as *ambient*. This multidirectional process is driven by the logic of imitation that the TikTok platform has been designed to facilitate. Ultimately, we considered how TikTok's personalization

algorithm (its ForYou page) functions to constitute subjects that align with both the propagandists' goals and the incentivization logics and affordances of the platform.

This dynamic surfaced from our analysis of RussianQuinn, whose pro-Kremlin content was several orders of magnitude more popular than her earlier "both sides" approach to the Russo-Ukrainian war. When considered through the lens of ambient propaganda, RussianQuinn's patriotic lip-synching, Red Army cosplay, and displays of "Z" were not primarily (as proponents of a classic propaganda model would assert) attempts to harness her status as an *influencer* to *target* her *followers* with pro-Kremlin propaganda. Rather, they are part of *the multidirectional feedback loop between the individual and the imitative environment of WarTok*—just as they would be in any other zone of TikTok, from BookTok to WokeTok. RussianQuinn's behavior on TikTok was by no means original, and while we cannot know what she saw in her daily feed, as for every other user of the platform, her ForYouPage is designed to tune-in to her. As an influencer, she is likely attentive to those signals when deciding what trends and memes to align her performances with.

Our case study approach has its limitations. One might argue that the online behavior of individuals like Mademoiselle Fluf, RussianQuinn, or other Russians displaying the Z sign is relatively insignificant compared to large-scale Kremlin influence campaigns (cf. Beseler & Toepfl, 2024). However, this article contends that ambient propaganda operates precisely through the multidirectional attunement between individual users, platform affordances, and state-aligned resentment—whether intentionally or not. Drawing on Tarde, Althusser, and Foucault, we conceptualize ambient propaganda as an aggregation of micro-level interactions, the study of which necessitates specific anchor points to examine ideological interpellation. The focus on RussianQuinn as a case study has allowed us to analyze the intricate, multidirectional interactions that might be overlooked in a large-scale quantitative analysis of WarTok. While the "Z" trend was far from marginal, future research may reveal to what extent our concept and exploratory analysis are transposable to other political contexts and digital media environments.

The proposed rethinking of traditional propaganda models is not intended as an intellectual exercise. As a concept, ambient propaganda addresses emergent communication dynamics with practical implications. It highlights how propaganda and influencer culture converge, blurring the boundaries between them. It encourages scrutiny of how specific platform affordances favor particular modes of political mobilization, and it spotlights the importance of affective and embodied dimensions of contemporary propaganda. Finally, it invites scholarly focus on the production of highly attuned forms of subjectivity emerging from recursive and multidirectional dynamics. Such ambient forms of propaganda are not necessarily more benign than their broadcast-era predecessors, and this contemporary state-aligned messaging demands close scrutiny from scholars and experts of propaganda and disinformation. In the end, the multidirectional attunement of users with melodies, symbols, and gestures—all apparently devoid of coherent political argumentation—may amount to a more intractable form of pro-Kremlin recruitment and mobilization than more linear forms of propagandistic persuasion.

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