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The image of the Ukrainian military in 2022–2024 and the connective nature of its formation

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This study validates the hypothesis that the representation of the image of a Ukrainian fighter in social media is predominantly shaped by ordinary users, thereby underscoring the connecting nature of this image. For an in-depth study of the transformation of the image of a fighter, we used a combination of quantitative discourse analysis and qualitative narrative analysis. The study shows how, in less than 3 years, the image of military representatives has undergone profound narrative transformations, including tonality adjustments: if in the first months after February 24, 2022, the most popular statement was the statement of valor, efficiency, and professionalism of the military, then in the future attention increased to negative features: the Soviet way of thinking, neglect of preparation or risks, toxicity of communication and methods of work, etc. The authors' study of such judgments made it possible to assert that the representation of a fighter's image in social media largely depends on which users are more willing to form this image at a given moment, as well as on important social events that trigger its discussion.

Keywords: strategic communications, strategic narrative, Russian-Ukrainian war, Armed Forces of Ukraine, image of a soldier

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Образ українського військового у 2022-2024 роках і конективна природа його формування

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Це дослідження доводить конективну природу репрезентації образу українського бійця в соціальних медіа, тобто, таку, що створена перш за все рядовими користувачами соціальних медіа. Для глибинного вивчення трансформації образу бійця нами використано поєднання кількісного дискурс-аналізу та якісного наративного аналізу. Дослідження показує, як за неповні 3 роки імідж представників війська зазнав глибинних наративних трансформацій, зокрема й коригування тональності: якщо в перші місяці після 24 лютого 2022 року найпопулярнішою була констатація звитяжності, ефективності та професійності військових, то в подальшому зростала увага й до негативних рис: радянського способу мислення, нехтування підготовкою чи ризиками, токсичності спілкування та методів роботи тощо. Вивчення авторів таких суджень дало можливості стверджувати, що репрезентація образу бійця в соцмережах значною мірою залежить від того, які користувачі в цей момент з більшою готовністю цей образ формують, а також від важливих суспільних подій, які запускають його обговорення.

Ключові слова: стратегічні комунікації, стратегічний наратив, російсько-українська війна, Збройні сили України, образ військового

Relevance of the study

The full-scale invasion of Russia, launched on February 24, 2022, provoked a radical rethinking of value guidelines by most Ukrainian citizens. Such circumstances traditionally form the "need for orientation" (Weaver, 1980): a situation of great demand for explanations of reality, as well as for new strategies of behavior. One of these benchmarks was Ukrainians who joined the army, volunteering, humanitarian or information activities. Ukrainian traditional and social media, the interest of which has grown rapidly since the beginning of the invasion, as evidenced by the increase in the number of visits to news sites (on average +300%), the number of subscribers to popular news social media resources (from +90% to +770% since the beginning of the invasion), and the level of attention of Ukrainians to news – 89% (Nanovska, 2024), have actively written about such new role models. Ukrainian servicemen are the "media faces" of war. We assume – and this became the main **hypothesis of** our study – that the social media representation of the image of a soldier in the Ukrainian information space reflected the public mood about the war and was formed primarily by ordinary participants in the information space. Thus, in 2022, the priority of online discussions was problems that are usually at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid, such as power blackouts (CAT-UA, 2023). Over time, a challenge to a positive image of a military man began to form: a split between the front and the rear, the military and the civilians. At the same time, problems began to accumulate, including the replenishment of the army and a general

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The author Artem Zakharchenko declared a conflict of interest. He is the member of editorial board. The manuscript was processed by an independent editor, and the author Artem Zakharchenko was excluded from the review and decision-making process.

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deterioration in the mood of Ukrainians on social media regarding the war (Luzan, 2024). These transformations, according to our assumption, took place simultaneously with changes in the image of the fighter on social media, and therefore, the landmarks and role models for Ukrainian citizens.

The purpose of the study: to determine the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the image of a Ukrainian soldier in social media, and the patterns of their change since the beginning of the invasion; to identify the factors of such changes by identifying the authors of judgments about fighters and changing their behavior.

Analysis of recent research and publications

The problem of representing the Ukrainian army and the image of military personnel lies at the intersection of three theoretical frameworks: strategic communications and strategic narratives, the creation of images and mythical ideas about specific social groups, as well as the use of communication technologies for this purpose.

The concept of "strategic communications" is multifaceted and multidisciplinary, as it is applied by researchers not only in social communication studies but also in various related fields, including political science, economics, and military affairs. Theorists of strategic communications see the environment of their implementation as a network within which messages are distributed between its different members, and it is in this branched environment that stories are formed (Hagenbach & Koessler, 2010). Thus, strategic communications are not necessarily a two-way, but rather a multi-vector process of joint construction of meanings, which is interactive in nature (van Ruler, 2018). It is in such a multi-vector environment, obviously, that the image of a fighter is formed.

This article is primarily devoted to the military vision of strategic communication and the image of the fighter as part of it. Military theorists (Holmqvist, 2013) define strategic communication (stratcom) as the effective interaction with the civilian population to attract them to their side during armed confrontation through the ethical and ontological justification of war. That is, victory in the kinetic war is guaranteed by victory in the "war for the hearts and minds" of people. The main tool of such confrontation is the strategic narrative – that is defined as the means used by political actors to construct a common vision of the past, present, and future, which shapes the behavior of internal and external actors, manages expectations, and changes the discursive environment in which actors operate (Miskimmon et al, 2013). However, this approach was created for the context of military actions of great powers (primarily the United States of America) abroad (in Iraq, Afghanistan), and not for the conditions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, as a result, an existential war. For these conditions, Ukrainian researchers have developed a separate approach.

It is known that anyone with access to the Internet can influence events that occur in a real-world environment, including those on the battlefield (Edwards, 2013). The definition of the phenomenon of "mass self-communication" is significant: the Internet and social media have deprived the elite of the exclusive prerogative to shape the agenda (Castells, 2009). This became noticeable in the example of mass protests since 2011, such as the Arab Spring, #MeToo movements, Occupy Wall Street, etc., which later described the phenomenon of affective publics – a special state of the online audience that allows it to behave as an organized force (Papacharissi, 2015). In the same way, during the war in Ukraine, a connective strategic narrative was formed (Zakharchenko, 2025), that is, one that was mostly created by social media users, not by the authorities. Thus, the connective nature of strategic narrative implies that its formation is not monopolized by a single structure; instead, there are many interconnected actors who create a story that motivates people to fight.

The image of a fighter in a strategic narrative performs a function of "describing the main character of the story", and is, of course, one of its most important parts. Numerous studies have

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been devoted to it; in particular, it is worth highlighting the analysis of the evolution of the image of soldiers in American culture from World War II to the Vietnam War (Huebner, 2008). In the study of the image of British soldiers, they compared three classic stereotypes about them – heroes, victims, thieves – and came to the conclusion that in their culture, there are now more depictions of the military as vulnerable people, although not without preserving the heroic image of a soldier as one that prevails (McCartney, 2011). The studies mentioned did not aim to identify general patterns in the formation of the image of defenders but were of an applied nature. In the Ukrainian academic discourse, there is also a study of the image of soldiers, in particular, the period of the Anti-Terrorist Operation: Nauruzov & Pidmohylna (2018) studied how the Ukrainian media formed the heroic image of soldiers, and came to the conclusion that the awareness of ordinary Ukrainians with their compatriots who defend them was low at that time. The archetypal components of this image were also investigated based on Facebook posts (Khraban & Silko, 2021), but without quantification that would provide an idea of the current ratio of different ideas about the military in public opinion, at least through social media. More relevant research has been devoted to the use of visual language to construct modern representations of heroes from the Russian-Ukrainian war, with the conclusion that this approach moves away from romanticizing the past and creates a new national myth based on the stories of real military personnel (Tymoshenko, 2024).

So, we see that there is still a need to study a holistic image of a Ukrainian soldier during a full-scale invasion, by testing the theory that it is part of a connective strategic narrative and therefore corresponds to its laws and is formed mainly not by the authorities, but by other figures in the information space.

Method

Quantitative part of the study

To study the image of a fighter, we employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, specifically discourse analysis and narrative analysis.

The study's source base comprised an array of data accumulated by the NGO Communication Analysis Team – Ukraine (CAT-UA) as part of its research on military communication. The data is compiled as follows: CAT-UA analysts randomly selected 1,250 posts every day from all publications dedicated to military topics published within the pro-Ukrainian segment of social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, Instagram, TikTok) for the period from February 24, 2022, to November 15, 2024. Then, in this array, for each message, CAT-UA analysts determined the key message using the method of analyzing PR messages (Zakharchenko, 2022). That is, this array served as a source of semi-processed data for us. This array has been partially cleaned of bot posts, if any were detected by CAT-UA analysts. However, such cleaning is not technically complete. In addition, no cleaning was performed to remove fake messages and information influence operations by hostile states, as we believe that these influences are an important factor in shaping discourse.

For the purposes of our study, only posts with key messages related to the Ukrainian military were selected from the broader array. These are messages like "Ukrainians are proud of, thank the Armed Forces of Ukraine", "The Ukrainian militaries are well trained and equipped", "Ukrainians quarrel with each other", "Ukrainians criticize the Armed Forces of Ukraine, volunteers", "Ukrainians help Ukrainian soldiers", etc. A total of 70 key messages were identified that could be used to define posts containing characteristics of Ukrainian soldiers. Thus, we received an array of 47,632 publications that most likely describe the image of the Ukrainian military. 1500 messages were randomly selected from this array, of which 883 turned out to be relevant during the encoding process.

By manually coding two trained encoders, the following categories were defined for each message:

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1. The tone of the assessment of the Ukrainian military.
2. The role played by the fighter.
3. Specialty or position of a military man.
4. Generalized characteristics in 1-2 words.
5. Post author category.
6. For posts from citizens – the author's attitude to military service (liable for military service, not liable for military service, military personnel).

Intercoder reliability was calculated using 100 lines of the array as an example and varied between 0.87 and 0.96 depending on the indicator.

The obtained quantitative data were statistically processed in Microsoft Excel, and generalizations were made for each category within the framework of the discourse analysis, taking into account not only the content of the messages but also the behavior of the authors and external events.

Qualitative part of the study

The narrative analysis was conducted using the same data set, but with high-quality thematic coding. Meaningful judgments about Ukrainian fighters were not standardized or counted; instead, they were recorded in a separate document structured by topic. Thus, a list of topics related to Ukrainian fighters was obtained, which were discussed on social media, each consisting of a certain number of judgments present on social media. Each of these topics was presented in a coherent narrative by the publication's authors.

Methodological limitations of the study

The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches enables us to overcome the traditional limitations of each method. For example, qualitative narrative analysis made it possible to consider the specific characteristics of the objects of study, which are not salient enough and therefore do not manifest themselves in quantitative research, but are important for many Ukrainians. On the other hand, quantitative methods enable a focus on the features of the soldier's image that are truly noticeable in social media, thereby overcoming the narrator's subjectivity.

However, the limitations of the data source remain relevant. It does not consider the opinions of people who either do not use social media or do not actively contribute to it. In addition, some features of the image of a soldier that social media users prefer not to voice in accordance with the principle of the "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) may not be considered.

Results

Quantitative analysis

Attitude towards fighters

Despite the total predominance of positive mentions in the sample (80%, see Figure 1), significant changes are noticeable in the dynamics. For example, in the second quarter of 2024, this figure was only 64%.

The most positive period in the perception of the Ukrainian fighter was 2022. At this time, they were described as glorious, associated with the hope of victory. Stories about how they destroy the occupiers and seize their equipment, know how to organize life in the trenches, sacrifice their lives for the sake of Ukraine, or otherwise die under Russian fire, and the streets are named after them, prevailed. In the liberated territories, soldiers are greeted with gifts. In the first year of the full-scale invasion, there is almost no negative attitude towards the military; however, closer to the beginning of 2024, complaints emerge about the actions of military territorial recruitment and social support centers. The share of messages without pronounced emotionality is also growing – about mobilization and the need to replenish the army. To a lesser extent, complaints about the incompetence of military commanders are noticeable in the information space (for example, in

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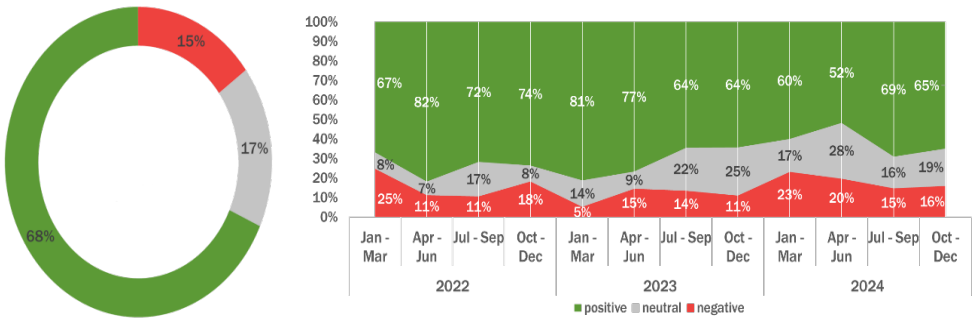
the situation with the formation of the 128th Separate Mountain Assault Brigade on the front line in November 2023).

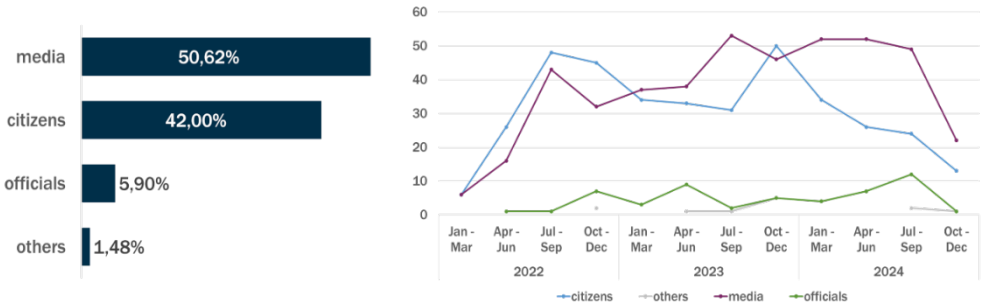
Figure 1.
The general distribution of user sentiment and the dynamics of its change (percentage of the number in the sample as a whole and quarterly)



Sources of communication

In the first months of the war, **citizens**' communication about the image of a soldier is livelier than the media, although they mainly distribute the content of various portals (mostly regional media or news YouTube channels). Women and, less often, men spread emotional stories: for example, about how parents searched for the body of their dead son right in the middle of the field and took him out in the trunk from shelling to bury him with dignity. **Initially**, the media tend to cover the military in the context of hostilities or bold decisions to join the army. They actively disseminate interviews with the military, in which they discuss the combat path. Over time, there are more obituaries in the media, which, in the end, seize the initiative from citizens, who begin to publish much less content about the war (the turning point was the period of discussion of changes before mobilization – with the final transfer of the initiative to the media after the presentation of the relevant draft law, see Figure 2). However, over time, citizens began to actively request that they sign petitions to award the defenders the title of Hero posthumously. **Official bodies** appear in the information space less frequently, with specific stories about the military, holiday congratulations, obituaries, and appeals to join the ranks of the Ukrainian Defense Forces.

Figure 2.
The frequency of occurrence of key sources of judgments about the military (percentage of the total sample) and the dynamics of the activity of these sources (number in the sample)



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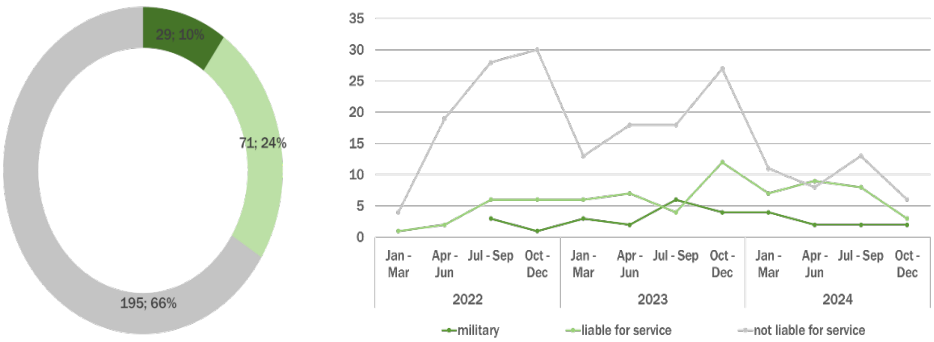
The author's attitude to military service

Since the beginning of 2022, the category **of non-liable for military service** (mostly women) has been actively disseminating stories about soldiers, accompanying them with emotional comments (expressing gratitude, pride, sadness). Such accents are sometimes accompanied *by magical or poetic characteristics of the military* ("when he picked up a violin, the shooting stopped" or "heroes do not die because they are made of flint"), as well as prayers for the preservation of life. Over time, the activity in this category declines and gradually equals that of the other two groups (see Figure 3), and the portion of the content written by non-conscripts has already become more realistic. At first, those **liable for military service** retell stories of their military participation in certain operations and obituaries, but as 2024 approaches, they are increasingly discussing mobilization and the actions of military recruitment office representatives. The **military itself often appears** in videos recorded on TikTok about the course of hostilities. In mid-2023, the surge in content from them is partly due to attention to counteroffensive assessments. Later, this content is replaced by textual stories about everyday conditions of service or certain achievements, such as promotions in rank.

Figure 3.
The frequency of categories of citizens who spoke about the military, according to their attitude to military service (percentage of the total sample of posts from citizens), and the dynamics of their activity (number in the sample)



Roles in which the military appears

The role **of defenders** from the aggressor significantly prevails in the sample (more than half of all posts, see Figure 4), with a description of how they perform official tasks: we are talking about the personal stories of the military, everyday difficulties (training, equipment, weapons, weather, clashes with the occupiers) and responding to these challenges, new realities of life (trenches, shelling, etc.), everyday life and facilities (water, Starlink, etc.). Flaunting of new weapons is noticeable. The role **of the victim** makes up a fifth of the massif: severe trials in captivity or after wounds, and most often, a statement of the death of soldiers without details. Among the descriptions of the role of **the hero** (almost the same share) are stories about the sacrifice of the dead (especially prominent people like V. Skakun or R. Ratushnyi), about successes in the defense of the Motherland (such as the long-term defense of Mariupol and Bakhmut), and about the rescue of comrades. Petitions for the title of "Hero of Ukraine" with descriptions of the applicants are also becoming increasingly noticeable, which, on the one hand, allows you to learn more about the heroic biographies of the deceased, but on the other hand, usually consist of template messages about them and do not contain any unique information. The context of the threat from the military (2.9%) becomes more visible from 2024, as evident in stories about enlistment offices, whose

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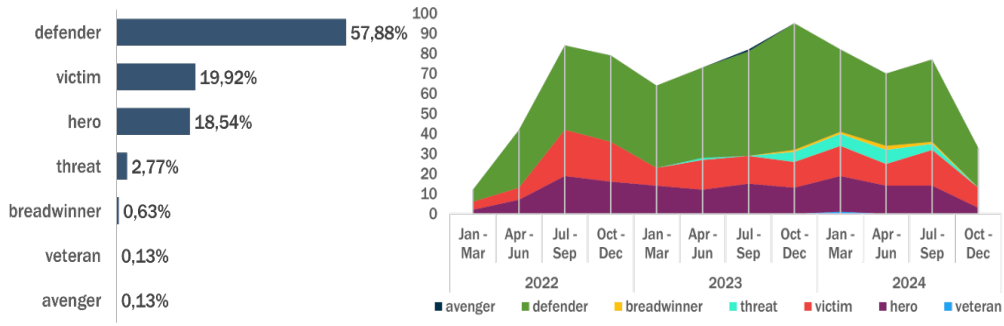
representatives are feared by civilians or who are dissatisfied with the military due to receiving low-quality replacements. Less often, stories of criminal negligence of commanders (for example, the formation of the 128th brigade near the forward positions) are told about the threat. Less than 1% fall into the roles of breadwinner (joining the ranks of Ukraine's Defense Forces as an opportunity to improve one's – or family's – financial situation, as indicated by salaries in vacancies), veteran, or **avenger**.

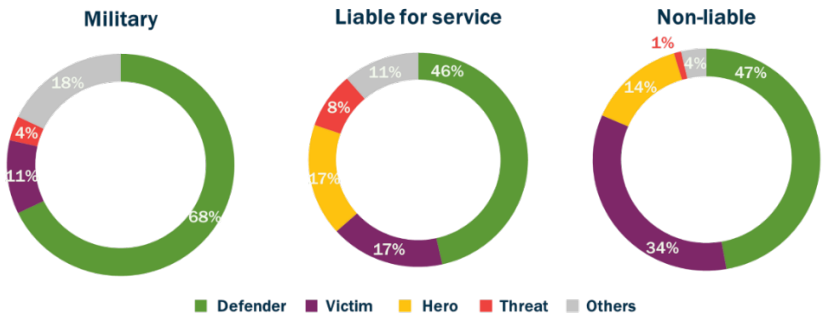
Figure 4.
The share of posts with key roles in which the military appears (percentage of the total sample) and the change in attention to them (number in the sample)



Comparison of the author's roles and attitude to military service

As we can see in Figure 5, the military themselves mostly talk about their service as a routine to protect the state and their loved ones (68% in the corresponding category), share footage where they are in positions, performing certain tasks, or just in full military equipment (which invariably attracts attention from women). Sometimes they criticize commanders whose orders they consider threatening. At the same time, unlike some civilians, they are not inclined to consider their work a manifestation of heroism or extraordinary abilities. Civilians, in turn, pick up the stories of outstanding military figures and frame them as heroic, such as those of M. Dianov and A. Verkhohlyad, among others. Although there is enough emphasis on ordinary people in the army. The threat from the enlistment officers is almost completely noticeable in the posts of men liable for military service. Non-liable (women) are very sensitive to the positioning of soldiers as victims (34% in the relevant category) – about how they are taken away by the war or suffer (in captivity, because of wounds).

Figure 5.
Comparison of roles depending on the categories of citizens who speak about them (share of all posts from a certain category)



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Characteristics of the military

In this list, the recognition of extraordinary qualities prevails brave, legendary, heroic, indomitable, sacrificial, who survived the most terrible episodes of war (see Figure 6). Habitual soft skills (such as the ability to perform tasks, responsibility) remain in the background, as well as the recognition of intellectual or physical abilities. Negative characteristics remain on the margins (prone to corporal punishment, criminal acts) and often relate to the moments of interaction of the enlistment officers with civilians, and not the military among themselves. Due to age, the characteristics of soldiers often appear as young, in the prime of life, which contrasts with the existing and described in the Ukrainian media problem of replenishing the army with young personnel against the backdrop of the "aging" of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Strashkulych, 2024). There are also mentions of those who held the line since the ATO in Donbas and have since gained combat experience, which has been needed since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

Figure 6.
"A cloud of words" from the characteristics of the military on social media, in Ukrainian (the larger the size of the word/phrase, the more often it occurs)

Military positions mentioned in posts

The most common mentions of "classic" positions in social media are riflemen, gunners, sappers, etc. (see Figure 6). But unit commanders are even more often mentioned – stories about exceptional intelligence and talents are often associated with them, as well as enlistment officers, amid the attention to mobilization.

A fifth of all posts were devoted to the **commanders of the unit**, where certain specialties/positions were indicated. They are often mentioned as representatives of a new formation who led their subordinates and died alongside them. Among such personalities is D. Kotsyubaylo ("Da Vinci"). However, later, some of them became both objects of criticism for criminal orders (for example, lining up at the front) and victims of despair (the suicide of Commander I. Hryb after leaving Vuhledar).

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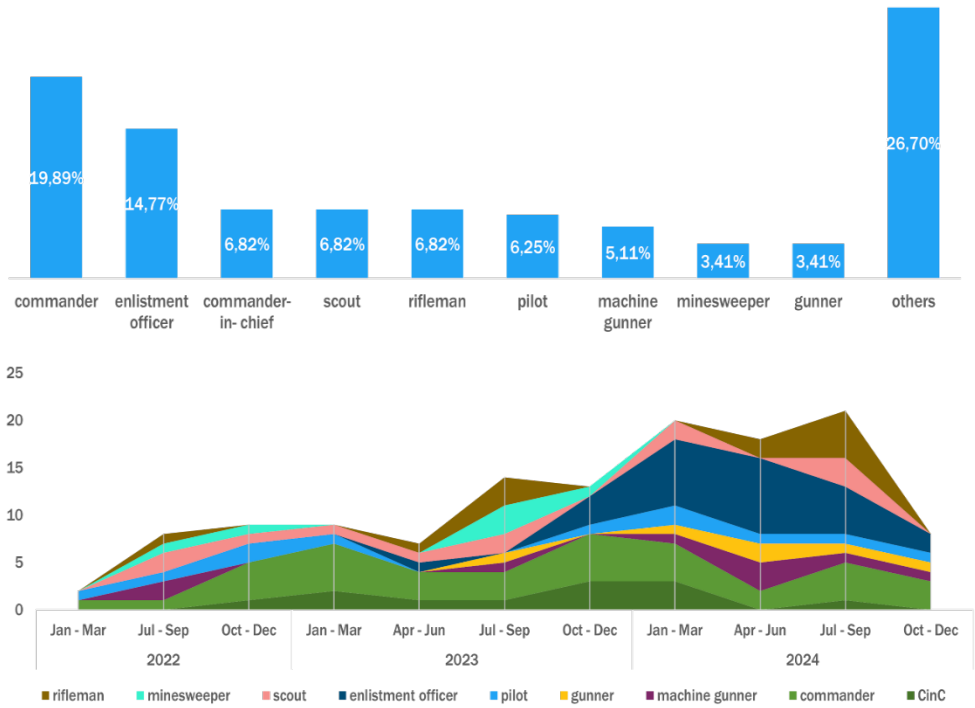
Figure 7.
Distribution of attention to positions/specialties in the army (share among the entire array in which specific specialties are mentioned), as well as changes in attention to them (number of posts in the sample)



An enlistment officer is almost always represented critically: both by civilians liable for service, and by the military. Texts in defense of the very principle of mobilization are noticeable, but not in defense of this category of military. Mentions **of the Commander-in-Chief** are, first, mentions of V. Zaluzhnyi, mostly full of respect and with high marks. Such a level of trust allows direct communication of complex and unpopular topics – particularly the controversial draft law on strengthening the criminal liability of military personnel, on strengthening mobilization, etc.

Military positions related to specific functional duties in war (**scouts**, **riflemen**, **pilots**, **machine gunners**, **minesweepers**, etc.) are often visible in obituaries. Meanwhile, specialties in the military related to technological innovations (such as **unmanned aerial vehicle operators**) are less represented in the three-year sample; in addition, they have a rarer context obituary, unlike infantrymen and stormtroopers. In the first year of the full-scale war, there was a noticeable emphasis on the successes of the riskiest categories of the military, such as reconnaissance men or pilots, who significantly influenced the course of events (for example, in air battles for Kyiv or the defense of Mariupol).

In this way, we see that the image of a soldier, if it is not generalized but refers to specific individuals with specific combat specialties, is primarily determined by the commanders and infantry, but other specialties add important accents to it.

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Qualitative analysis

2022. The Ukrainian strategic narrative highlights the key provisions that the Ukrainian soldier is well-trained, motivated, and a source of pride and gratitude. Initially, there was a noticeable emphasis on supply problems; however, later, Western partners who provided military assistance to Ukraine made adjustments to their communication. A Ukrainian soldier is portrayed as a professional; their experience enables us to discuss being ahead of NATO standards. And also, about the contrast with the newly mobilized Russians: both at the beginning of the invasion and after V. Putin's decision to partially mobilize in September 2022, against the backdrop of the retreat from the Kharkiv region. The waves of gratitude and love for the military are amplified by a successful counteroffensive; the army is considered a new collective superhero and has earned great trust. The military receives special gratitude from residents of the liberated cities. Obituaries are distributed by both ordinary citizens regarding their loved ones and by regional authorities – here, sadness is combined with respect. Manufacturers present new types of weapons. The military is being trained and trained. They try to equip the positions as conveniently as possible. Everything revolves around the narrative of preparing and caring for the military, driven by the desire for victory. After all, the presence of women in the Defense Forces has reached its highest values, and the Ministry of Defense is developing a separate uniform for them.

2023. High expectations are generated by the counteroffensive: the typical Ukrainian soldier is quickly mastering Western equipment, joining the "Offensive Guard"; it is emphasized that the occupied Ukrainian cities are waiting for the liberators. At the same time, internal problems of the army, which were less noticeable before, amidst the background of a general patriotic upsurge, are beginning to come out of the "shadows": about the poor provision of the military personnel, concealment of losses, persecution of those who "tell the truth", sadists and corrupt officials. The faults of the military leadership become noticeable quickly, as in the case of the death of the soldiers of the 128th Separate Brigade (in November 2023). There is an increasing amount of emotionally charged negativity towards the command, as well as unconstructive squabbles (for example, between M. Bezuhla and V. Zaluzhnyi), which creates tension between the civilian and military authorities. Meanwhile, the enlistment summonses are gradually rocking a wave of indignation over the draft, which the Russians immediately use. The information space becomes a place for escalating fears about service. The authorities seek to address these problems, such as by sending enlistment officers to the front, but globally, this approach does not yield significant results. Ukrainians are proud of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, but they are in no hurry to join their ranks, despite the need for replenishment. Later, the emphasis was shifted to the topic of axiological conversations about "justice".

2024. The previous year's problems are intensifying, and a track of unresolved mobilization issues has been added, which has put the military in an uncertain position against the background of the lack of defined terms of service and their proper replacement. S. Gnezdilov's demonstrative unauthorized abandonment of the unit (AWOL, which stands for "away without official leave") initiates a discussion of the fatigue of the military; they mostly condemn the act publicly, but, despite everything, there is no change in perception: the opinion that someone else should fight remains established. At the same time, various influential Ukrainian opinion leaders are working to promote the popularization of military service and increase the involvement of compatriots in the defense of their country. We are talking about writers, musicians, comedians, entrepreneurs, artists, and actors. Additionally, the narrative about the military places a distinct emphasis on the manufacturability of solutions to save human lives (drones, ground-based robotic systems) and optimize bureaucratic processes (document flow, transfer between military units).

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Conclusions and discussion

The image of a soldier as an element of the strategic narrative is a complex construct consisting of many components, including:

- A set of symbolic representations of soldiers and epithets that characterize them: hero, defender, brave, etc.
- Notable stories associated with these images, based on real events: the defense of Azovstal and the subsequent capture of its defenders, the courageous deeds of fallen heroes such as Oleksandr Matsievsky, and their life stories, etc.
- Typical roles played by the bearers of the image: defender, victim, hero, threat, etc.
- Typical assessments of the actions of the military in such roles and the emotions they evoke: pride, fear, condemnation, love, etc.

This image has undergone transformations during the years of the full-scale invasion. Starting in 2022, the image of the fighter as a "superhero" prevailed and was maintained in later years, but to a lesser extent. It was formed primarily by non-liable for service, mainly women. However, the militaries themselves on social media presented a much less pretentious image of themselves: there was no heroic rhetoric in their descriptions, but instead, attention was given to everyday problems and life.

Over time, the category of authors that was the most massive at the beginning of the invasion – namely, non-liable for military service – radically reduced their attention to the image of a fighter, and the rest of the authors (military and civilians liable for military service, media, official institutions) began to form a more realistic image. Characteristics like "sunshine", "our guys", etc., in social media began to contrast with under-communicated problems that were previously tried to be talked about less: the average age of the military, uncertainty with the terms of service, the shortage of people in combat positions, AWOL, and the unprofessionalism of commanders. Almost exclusively, official speakers, rather than ordinary users, discussed the reforms. Instead, among the assessments of the fate of military personnel expressed by civilians, considering the high number of casualties, metaphors such as "one-way ticket" became more frequent. Among other military figures, the enlistment offices are mentioned more frequently, and their methods are condemned. Instead, it is difficult to find success stories on social media of people who were forcibly mobilized, yet were able to find themselves in a new role despite the circumstances.

Character changes rarely occur gradually, just because a certain number of fighters with a new status accumulate. Almost always, tectonic changes occur due to a certain event: the terrorist attack in Olenivka highlighted the role of a soldier of the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a victim, and the transfer of aircraft increased the visibility of pilots. However, different aspects of the soldier's image will be shaped by various events, and it does not seem realistic to name each of them over the course of these three years. Instead, we should note that real changes in the soldier's image are brought about by events that not only become newsworthy for the media but also become part of the strategic narrative, marking the stages of Ukraine's defense.

As a result, we see that official accounts form a minimal part of judgments about Ukrainian servicemen. The image of a Ukrainian soldier is largely shaped by citizens and the media, with their judgments significantly influenced by their attitude toward military service. Events that activate changes in such attention, and therefore changes in the image of a fighter, are not always initiated by official institutions, such as the draft law on mobilization or the Offensive Guard campaign. Along with these events, the creators of such news events can be both Russians (terrorist attack in Olenivka) and Western partners (the transfer of aircraft, which, however, took place at the insistence of the Ukrainian authorities).

The lack of full control of the Ukrainian authorities over the image of the Ukrainian fighter entails both disadvantages and advantages characteristic of the connective strategic narrative in general (Zakharchenko, 2025). On the one hand, this image becomes vulnerable to hostile

information influences and generally unpredictable cases, as the openness of the information space allows various actors to influence it. On the other hand, a positive perception of the image of a soldier in this case does not depend on the perception of power as a whole, and therefore, with a sharp deterioration in the image of the authorities as a result of certain scandals or information attacks, it allows for maintaining trust at least in the army.

Directions for future research

This study provides a general overview of the military`s image and the patterns of its formation. However, further research on this topic would be beneficial. In particular, it would be useful to:

- Determine the contribution of myths about individual Ukrainian heroes to the overall image of the military.
- Study the formation of the image of the military over a longer period, in particular during the Anti-Terrorist Operation / Joint Forces Operation.
- For practical, rather than scientific, research, it would be useful to map all the events that influenced the formation of the image of the soldier and establish cause-and-effect relationships between these events and changes in images.

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