



RESEARCH ARTICLES
ДОСЛІДНИЦЬКІ СТАТТІ

<https://doi.org/10.17721/CIMC.2025.38.69-83>

**“The War on an Invisible Front”:
Narratives about LGBTQ+ in Instagram and TikTok Comments**

Leonid Polishchuk

National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine

This article analyzes the dynamics of online discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ communities in the comments sections of Ukrainian social media (Instagram, TikTok) in the context of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine. The **study aims** to identify, classify, and analyze the dominant narratives that reflect perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals in the online space, as well as to examine the sentiment of discussions and their platform dependency. The paper employs a hybrid methodology based on a corpus of 600 comments from 20 viral videos. Quantitative content analysis and sentiment analysis were conducted, along with a qualitative discourse and narrative analysis, to identify underlying semantic structures. The **results** demonstrate a pronounced polarization of opinions in online comments, with 45% being positive, 38.2% negative, and 16.8% neutral. Statistically significant differences were found between the platforms: TikTok appears as a space of greater solidarity, while Instagram exhibits a higher level of conflict. Five dominant narratives structuring public communication were identified, the central one being the conflict between a narrative of equality and various forms of resistance, which exacerbates the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ communities. The study’s **conclusions** demonstrate that despite a significant level of hostility, the overall dynamics of expressions on social media during the war indicate a gradual increase in support for LGBTQ+ communities. This inference suggests a discrepancy between the sentiment of online reactions and data from previous sociological surveys. This process is a significant indicator of the value transformation within Ukrainian society. The practical significance of the work lies in providing recommendations for media and platforms on enhancing digital inclusion.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, content analysis, narrative analysis, social media, online comments, TikTok, Instagram, war

Citation: Polishchuk, L. (2025). “The War on an Invisible Front”: Narratives about LGBTQ+ in Instagram and TikTok Comments. *Current Issues of Mass Communication*, 38, 69–83.
<https://doi.org/10.17721/CIMC.2025.38.69-83>

Copyright: © 2025 Leonid Polishchuk. This is an open-access draft article distributed under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY)**. The use, distribution, or reproduction in other forms is permitted, provided the original author(s) or licensor are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution, or reproduction is permitted if it does not comply with these terms.



«Війна проти невидимого фронту»: наративи про ЛГБТК+ в коментарях Instagram і TikTok

Леонід Поліщук

Національний університет «Києво-Могилянська академія», Україна

У статті аналізується динаміка онлайн-дискурсу навколо ЛГБТК+ спільнот в коментарях українських соціальних мереж (Instagram, TikTok) в умовах повномасштабної війни Росії проти України. **Метою** дослідження є ідентифікація, класифікація та аналіз домінантних наративів, що відображають сприйняття ЛГБТК+ людей в онлайн-просторі, а також аналіз тональності обговорень та її залежності від платформи. У роботі застосовано гібридний метод: на основі корпусу з 600 коментарів під 20 віральними відео було проведено кількісний контент-аналіз із застосуванням аналізу тональності, а також якісний дискурс- та наративний аналіз для виявлення глибинних смислових структур. **Результати** демонструють виражену поляризацію думок в онлайн-коментарях: 45% з них були позитивними, 38,2% – негативними, 16,8% – нейтральними. Виявлено статистично значущі відмінності між платформами: TikTok є простором більшої солідарності, тоді як Instagram демонструє вищий рівень конфліктності. Ідентифіковано п'ять домінантних наративів, що структурують публічну комунікацію, центральним з яких є конфлікт між наративом рівності та різними формами опору, що посилює вразливість ЛГБТК+ спільнот. **Висновки** дослідження демонструють, що попри значний рівень ворожості, загальна динаміка висловлювань у соцмережах в умовах війни свідчить про поступове посилення підтримки ЛГБТК+ спільнот. Це вказує на розбіжність між тональністю онлайн-реакцій та даними попередньо проведених соціологічних опитувань. Цей процес є важливим маркером ціннісної трансформації українського суспільства. Практичне значення роботи полягає у наданні рекомендацій для медіа та платформ щодо посилення цифрової інклюзії.

Ключові слова: ЛГБТК+, контент-аналіз, наративний аналіз, соціальні мережі, онлайн-коментарі, TikTok, Instagram, війна

The representation of LGBTQ+ communities (standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer – an umbrella term for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities – and +, representing all other gender identities and sexual orientations) in the media serves as a key source of social knowledge about their identity, influencing the formation of public attitudes (McInroy & Craig, 2017; Randev, 2022). A prolonged lack of positive portrayals in traditional media has contributed to the marginalization of these groups (Gross, 2001). In this context, Stuart Hall (1997) interprets representation as a process of constructing meaning that depends on cultural codes and interpretive practices, thereby highlighting the relativism in the depiction of gender and sexual diversity.

Social networks, as a key type of online platform (specifically, interactive digital media platforms), differ from other forms of digital content (e.g., forums or static websites) in their interactivity, algorithmic distribution, and capacity for real-time engagement. These characteristics make them a unique environment for community formation and the exchange of ideas.

Social media have become an integral part of the daily lives of LGBTQ+ youth, providing a space for self-expression, emotional support, and access to relevant information (Craig et al., 2021). Within this interactive context, comments on posts have become a central arena for expressing public opinion, making them a valuable data source for analyzing sentiments in online discourse (Alafwan et al., 2023). These virtual spheres enable the open discussion of sensitive

Leonid Polishchuk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7835-2124>

PhD student in Media and Communication Studies, Mohyla School of Journalism, Faculty of Social Sciences and Social Technologies, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, 2 Skovorody St., Kyiv 04070, Ukraine (Specialty 061 – Journalism)

Corresponding author's email: Leonid Polishchuk leonid.polishchuk@ukma.edu.ua



topics, thereby forming a “digital public sphere,” the analysis of which is crucial for the social sciences. This problem becomes particularly relevant in Ukraine during the full-scale war, which has radically transformed the social landscape and exacerbated the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ communities (Margalit, 2019).

Russia’s war against Ukraine has not only a physical dimension but also an invisible one – a struggle over ideology and societal values. This virtual “war on an invisible front” unfolds on social media, where narratives of tolerance and support clash with those of aggression, disinformation, and prejudice that can deepen social divisions. This struggle goes against a backdrop of global ideological confrontation, where, as researchers note, Russia openly positions its invasion as a defense of “traditional values” against a perceived “liberal and decadent West” (Luciani & Shevtsova, 2024; Tsaturyan, 2024). Therefore, analyzing online discourse is critically important for understanding the transformations occurring in society.

The full-scale war has created a unique social paradox: sociological surveys record an unprecedented increase in tolerance and support for equal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals, partly due to their participation in the country’s defense (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2024). Concurrently, Alon Margalit (2019) notes that armed conflict significantly exacerbates the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ persons who already face violence and discrimination in peacetime. Notably, the rights of LGBTQ+ people are an integral part of universal human rights, which prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, as enshrined in international documents ratified by Ukraine, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the European Convention on Human Rights (1950). These rights are interconnected with national legislation, yet the current Law of Ukraine “On the Principles of Preventing and Combating Discrimination” (2012) does not explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity among its protected characteristics. This creates a legislative gap, which Draft Law No. 13597 (2025) – registered but not yet adopted – aims to close. On the other hand, research acknowledges the potential drawbacks of social media during crises, such as the dissemination of disinformation and the amplification of harmful narratives that can exacerbate existing social tensions and vulnerabilities (Ye et al., 2023). As Marian Blanco-Ruiz and Clara Sainz-de-Baranda (2018) point out, digital media are a battleground for visibility, where marginalized groups often find more opportunities to create communities of support compared to traditional mass media.

The **aim** of this study is twofold: first, to reveal the dynamics of narratives concerning LGBTQ+ communities in social media comments, and second, to develop an empirical model of their impact on online perceptions and media discourse amid the war, with the overarching goal of offering practical recommendations for moderation policies and strengthening digital inclusion.

The **object** of the study is user reactions to content about LGBTQ+ communities on the social networks Instagram and TikTok. The **subject** is user comments under video content that reflect attitudes toward LGBTQ+ topics.

This research makes both a theoretical and practical contribution to understanding how LGBTQ+ content is perceived in the online space during the war. In the media sphere, it enriches knowledge about the construction of identities in the digital environment by integrating theories of narrative and representation with empirical data from platforms where algorithms shape discourse. It also provides empirical insights into emotional reactions, stereotypes, and values, which can be used to improve moderation mechanisms and communication strategies on social media. More broadly, it contributes to the development of digital sociology and queer studies through an analysis of 600 comments under 20 viral videos with over 10 million views, assessing polarization in online discourse.

To empirically test and quantitatively verify the relationship between platform characteristics and the tone of discourse amid the war, we formulated the following operationalized hypotheses:



Hypothesis 1: The discursive environment on TikTok is characterized by a higher proportion of supportive comments towards LGBTQ+ communities compared to Instagram, reflecting differences in audience demographics and communication culture on these platforms.

Hypothesis 2: Negative comments on both social networks reproduce persistent stereotypical narratives and provoke chain reactions, thereby escalating digital conflict and increasing the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ communities.

Hypothesis 3: The sentiment of public discussions in the online space is more negative than the general societal attitudes recorded in sociological surveys, indicating a discrepancy between online communication and broader social trends.

To achieve the aim, we set the following research objectives:

1. To identify thematic clusters in comments under LGBTQ+ content on Instagram and TikTok, analyze their sentiment (positive, negative, neutral), and establish associations between themes and emotional reactions in the context of war.

2. To identify and classify dominant narratives (support, resistance, ambivalence, etc.), assess their prevalence and dynamics in response to different types of content, in order to identify prevailing discourses.

3. To examine how the discovered narratives mirror and potentially influence broader public discussions on LGBTQ+ inclusion amid the national crisis, comparing the results with existing sociological data on support for the LGBTQ+ community in Ukraine to trace patterns of convergence or discrepancy.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the sociocultural dynamics in algorithmically governed spaces where perceptions of vulnerable groups emerge, spread, and are contested, providing a basis for future interventions in digital communication during conflicts.

Literature Review

Social media have become a pivotal tool for LGBTQ+ communities, facilitating not only the dissemination of information but also the creation of safe spaces for self-identification and advocacy (Andika et al., 2024; Eickers, 2024; Berger et al., 2022). A synthesis of existing research indicates that these platforms serve a dual function: on one hand, they enhance the visibility of marginalized groups, and on the other, they foster the formation of a collective identity through interaction and support. For instance, as Muhammad Fauzi Fitri Andika et al. (2024) note, Instagram serves as an effective tool for overcoming stereotypes and promoting inclusivity, providing LGBTQ+ communities with a space for authentic self-expression, advocacy, and the formation of a multidimensional identity. Similarly, TikTok is famous as a platform that promotes the visibility of LGBTQ+ content and can positively influence the perception of this community among users, notably by increasing levels of acceptance, even if the topic causes some anxiety in parts of the audience (Romadlon et al., 2022). Research by Matthew Berger et al. (2022) supports these findings, highlighting how social media has become a space where young people can explore their identity, receive peer support, and avoid isolation – a particularly crucial function for those without access to physical LGBTQ+ communities. At the same time, social networks allow LGBTQ+ users to control the process of disclosing their identity through strategies of anonymity and content access restrictions (Berger et al., 2022). In synthesis with Gen Eickers (2024), who presents social media as a space that fosters a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ individuals by enabling interaction with people who have similar life experiences, it becomes evident that these platforms not only facilitate individual self-expression but also promote collective solidarity, shaping a sense of community amidst marginalization.

Despite these positive aspects, the literature actively explores the risks that accompany the opportunities social media offers, creating a comprehensive understanding of their role for LGBTQ+ communities. Social networks, despite their inclusivity, can be platforms for cyberbullying, hate speech, and discriminatory expressions, which have serious negative consequences for



the physical and mental health of adolescents and young adults (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). This point aligns with a broader analysis of comments as a method for gauging online audience reactions to LGBTQ+ subject matter (Insight Public Organization, 2021; Hayman, 2024), a domain where negative dynamics often prevail. A study by Paula Carvalho et al. (2023) analyzed 20,056 Portuguese-language comments on YouTube, manually classifying them by types of expression: hate speech, counter-speech, offensive language, and other categories. The results showed that about 70% of the comments had a negative or very negative sentiment. A significant prevalence of covert hate speech, manifested through irony or sarcasm, was characteristic of discourse about the LGBTQ+, as was a high level of counter-speech (Carvalho et al., 2023). In a similar vein, research by Kaden Hayman (2024) examined 100 comments under an Elle Magazine Facebook post about 30 famous LGBTQ+ individuals and found that 86% of these comments contained hostile or intolerant statements. The main themes of negative rhetoric included a desire to ignore LGBTQ+ topics, religious prejudice, the perception of LGBTQ+ identity as an illness or a trend, and overt disgust (Hayman, 2024). The NGO "Insight" (2021) further supported these conclusions with a large-scale study of the Ukrainian segment of Facebook, utilizing algorithmic analysis of 11,900 comments. The study found that 46% of comments had a neutral tone, 21% expressed support for LGBTQ+ communities, and 33% contained negative statements. Among the negative comments, 80% conveyed stereotypes and pseudoscientific claims, while overt calls to violence were rare. In sum, these studies demonstrate that social media comments reveal a complex spectrum of online reactions toward LGBTQ+ communities, ranging from overt hostility and subtle aggression to a substantial portion of neutral or supportive positions. It highlights the necessity of employing varied research methodologies and considering local contexts better to understand the climate of online discourse and combat bias.

Existing empirical analyses of audience reactions, such as the study by Insight (2021), focus on Facebook, while Instagram and TikTok – key platforms for youth audiences – remain largely unexplored in the Ukrainian academic field. Despite a gradual increase in attention to LGBTQ+ topics in the Ukrainian media landscape, there is a current lack of empirical research that systematically analyzes audience reactions, particularly comments under media content, in the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. To date, available research has predominantly focused on the general dynamics of LGBTQ+ media representation in the post-Euromaidan period and during the conflict in Donbas. For example, Maryna Shevtsova (2017) notes that after Euromaidan, there was an increase in the public visibility of LGBT communities. However, homophobic narratives persisted in public discourse, particularly in the rhetoric of right-wing radical groups. Maria Teteriuk (2016) highlights that within the discourse of "national unity," LGBT people were either excluded or forced to integrate through homonationalist strategies, which, in turn, created risks of further marginalization for the most vulnerable groups within the community. Therefore, notwithstanding the growing media focus on LGBTQ+ topics, the perception of this issue within society continues to be contested.

A context where the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights acquires a distinct geopolitical dimension exacerbates this contradiction (Verpoest, 2018). Russia's full-scale invasion is not only a military aggression but also an ideological project, openly positioned as a defense of "traditional values" against a supposedly decadent West (Luciani & Shevtsova, 2024). In this paradigm, Russia systematically employs anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric as a foreign policy tool that analysts describe as a clash of competing "projects of modernity": while Western democracies signal their modernity through the protection of minority rights, Russia promotes an alternative model based on patriarchal values (Luciani & Shevtsova, 2024; Tsaturyan, 2024). This ideological conflict is instrumentalized through the process of securitization, whereby a specific group – in this case, LGBTQ+ individuals – is constructed as an existential threat to the nation, its values, and its security (Luciani & Shevtsova, 2024). As researchers note, the Kremlin has for years used state media to foster a positive association between anti-LGBTQ+ views and anti-Ukrainian sentiments, effectively linking these



two issues into a single anti-Western narrative (Tsaturyan, 2024). This geopolitical struggle manifests directly in the Ukrainian media space, where Russian and pro-Russian media disseminate homophobic “formula stories” about LGBTQ+ people as “perverts.” In contrast, pro-Western media promote a counter-narrative of “heroes,” turning Ukraine into a “fulcrum of geopolitical contests” (Soroka et al., 2022).

Russian information operations also purposefully use LGBTQ+ topics on social media to deepen social divisions in Western countries, including Ukraine, by creating and spreading memes that simultaneously appeal to both progressive and conservative groups to provoke conflict (Jones, 2020). Notably, an analysis of the Ukrainian social media segment during the full-scale invasion, conducted by “Detector Media,” revealed that Russian propaganda deliberately uses LGBTQ+ themes to discredit Ukraine’s European choice, spreading manipulative narratives about “Gayropa” and using homophobic imagery to denigrate Ukrainian authorities and military personnel (Bilousenko et al., 2022). Thus, the negative narratives circulating on social media are often not merely spontaneous expressions of prejudice but local echoes of a transnational, instrumentalized anti-gender ideology. At the same time, the full-scale war has also triggered a reverse process – desecuritization – where the participation of LGBTQ+ people in the country’s defense contributes to their integration into the national narrative and reduces their perception as a threat (Luciani & Shevtsova, 2024). When synthesized with global research, the Ukrainian context illustrates how crisis events like war intensify polarization, where the positive aspects of visibility (as in Andika et al., 2024) collide with the risks of marginalization (as in Abreu & Kenny, 2018), underscoring the necessity of localized empirical analyses to understand the dynamics in conflict settings.

Method

Sample Rationale and Data Sources

This study aims to analyze public reactions in comments on LGBTQ+ topics within the Ukrainian digital space during the full-scale war. Following the recommendations regarding the need to study new media platforms (Alafwan et al., 2023), the analysis focuses on content from influential Ukrainian accounts on the social networks TikTok (“USE PRO TSE” [“ALL ABOUT IT”]¹, PrEP.com.ua²) and Instagram (Get Test³, PrEP.com.ua⁴), which are key platforms for the dissemination and discussion of LGBTQ+ issues. The selection of these accounts is justified by their popularity among youth and adult users, as well as their specific audience characteristics: TikTok is oriented toward dynamic, short-form content with high engagement (predominantly a younger audience of 18–34 years), whereas Instagram ensures broader reach through visual representation and transmedia distribution, including automatic content sharing to Facebook feeds. This feature enables engagement with older groups (35+ years) and promotes demographic diversity. Consequently, this approach enables a comparison of reactions across different social networks, taking into account their demographic differences.

The choice of these four accounts (which are created by an LGBTQ+ public organization) is explained by their significant cumulative reach and influence. E.g., the “USE PRO TSE” profile on TikTok has 123,400 followers and has received 7.5 million views over the past year (from September 23, 2024, to September 25, 2025, according to the platform’s built-in analytics), while

¹ USE PRO TSE. (n.d.). Videos [TikTok profile]. TikTok. Retrieved July 17, 2025, from <https://www.tiktok.com/@pro.sekc>.

² PrEP.com.ua. (n.d.). Videos [TikTok profile]. TikTok. Retrieved July 17, 2025, from https://www.tiktok.com/@prep_ukraine.

³ Get Test. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved July 17, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/gettest.com.ua/>.

⁴ PrEP.com.ua. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved July 17, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/prepcomua/>.



PrEP.com.ua on TikTok has 27,200 followers and 3.8 million views during the same period. These metrics were obtained through a thorough review of page statistics automatically calculated by the social networks, ensuring the accuracy and objectivity of the data.

Acknowledging the potential methodological challenges related to the algorithmic nature of social media and the specific audience of public organizations, we developed the research design to ensure maximum validity and analytical depth. A key argument for the chosen sample is that the analyzed content reaches far beyond a loyal audience or so-called “filter bubbles.” The accounts’ statistical data convincingly show that the vast majority of views are generated not by followers but through algorithmic recommendations to a broad audience. For example, for the “USE PRO TSE” account, 50.7% of traffic comes from the “For You” recommendation feed, while followers account for only 1.4% of views (as of September 25, 2025). Similarly, the average share of views from non-followers for the analyzed videos is 97%. The same situation applies to the selected Instagram pages, where 95% of viewers are not followers, and only 5% are subscribers. This position demonstrates that the content reaches a broad and heterogeneous audience, making their reactions a valuable cross-section of the public online discourse that emerges in these digital spaces.

A demographic analysis of the audience also refutes the notion that the content is exclusively targeting teenagers. The core audience on TikTok consists of young adults: the 18–24 age group constitutes 43.4% for “USE PRO TSE” and 44.6% for PrEP.com.ua, while the 25–34 age group makes up 33.2% and 35.2%, respectively (as of September 25, 2025), with a smaller share of older groups (35+ years – 15.5%), which nevertheless ensures the representativeness of the adult audience. In turn, on Instagram, the age distribution of viewers is as follows: 25–34 years – 26.8%, 35–44 years – 24.9%, 45–54 years – 19.5%, and the 55–64 age group constitutes 12.7% of the audience. Transmedia distribution plays a key role here: videos published on Instagram are automatically shared on Facebook. It is through this mechanism that older age groups, who are traditionally more active on Facebook, are effectively engaged. This case enables an expansion of reach and the inclusion of comments from a more diverse audience, encompassing a wider range of ages and viewpoints.

For the analysis, 20 viral videos (i.e., those that garnered a significant number of views and interactions; 12 from TikTok, 8 from Instagram) published between 2022 and 2025 were selected. This period encompasses the onset and progression of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, enabling an examination of the evolution of discourse under crisis conditions. The total number of views for these videos exceeds 12 million (precisely 12,248,101 views as of September 25, 2025, according to platform analytics). The average view count for a TikTok video is 652,412, with the most popular video amassing 3,433,500 views; for Instagram, the average is 552,395 views (as of September 25, 2025). Such a focus on viral content ensures the representation of reactions from a broad audience, as these videos entered the recommendation feeds of not only a niche demographic but also the general public, thereby reducing potential loyalty bias. From each video, we collected the 30 most popular comments (those that received the most likes and replies), comprising a total corpus of 600 comments. This approach, unlike random sampling, allows for the analysis of reactions that achieved the most outstanding visibility and support, and consequently have the most significant impact on shaping public discourse, as they are listed first, seen by most users, and capable of provoking chain discussions or agreement.

Potential limitations of algorithms, which may promote content only to interested users and amplify polarization (e.g., more positive sentiment on TikTok due to its younger audience), were minimized by focusing on viral videos with high non-follower reach. This situation is in line with a balanced gender and age distribution of the audience: the gender composition was established based on an analysis of statistics across all accounts (average figures: 42% male, 57% female, 1% other). Therefore, bias is minimal, while the sample captures a heterogeneous spectrum of opinions from the active online audience.



Data Analysis Procedure and Methods

Data analysis was conducted in two stages using a hybrid approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The first stage employed quantitative content analysis with manual coding, which, facilitated by discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995), allows for the consideration of contextual nuances such as irony, hidden meanings, and sarcasm that are inaccessible to automated systems (Neuendorf, 2017; Schreier, 2012). Each comment was classified by its tonality within Sentiment Analysis as positive, negative, or neutral. Besides, we performed thematic coding to identify key discussion topics. To enhance the reliability of categorization, the author independently verified the consistency of code application by re-coding a portion of the sample (20% of the corpus) after a time interval (Krippendorff, 2004, 2019). Furthermore, to assess inter-coder reliability, Krippendorff's alpha was calculated on a pilot subsample ($n = 100$ comments), yielding a value of 0.83, which indicates a high level of agreement (Krippendorff, 2019).

To increase methodological transparency and ensure the replicability of the results, a comprehensive coding scheme was developed for this study. It contains categories for tonality, thematic blocks, narrative markers, typical linguistic patterns, and examples (Template for analyzing..., 2025). This scheme was formed through inductive analysis, taking into account the context of the comments, and it reflects the specific reactions of users to LGBTQ+ content on social media. Additionally, to ensure replicability, the coding sheet includes examples from the actual comments. The ethical aspects of data collection were considered; the comments are public and have been anonymized without identifying the users.

The second stage employed narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) to identify deep semantic structures within the comments. Narrative theory, which has evolved from a structuralist focus on motives and functions (Burke, 1945; Barthes & Duisit, 1975) to cognitive and sociocultural studies of meaning- and identity-making (Bruner, 1991; Ricoeur, 1984), allows for the examination of stories as a fundamental mechanism for understanding reality. In this study, we regard a narrative as a stable interpretive framework that is reproduced in comments to make sense of LGBTQ+ topics. It is operationalized through the following components: (1) thematic focus, (2) typical roles (hero, victim, antagonist), (3) central conflict (e.g., tradition vs. modernity), and (4) a value-ideological frame. Narratives were identified inductively by detecting recurring plot structures within the thematic clusters established during the content analysis phase. This approach enables the distinction between themes (what is being said) and narratives (how it is being said, within the context of a specific plot logic).

This comprehensive methodology ensures a deep and well-founded analysis of public discussions in the most influential digital spaces where perceptions of LGBTQ+ communities are currently being formed and contested in the context of war.

Results

This section presents the empirical results of the study, obtained through a hybrid analysis of 600 comments. The data are structured according to the research objectives and aim to sequentially verify the stated hypotheses.

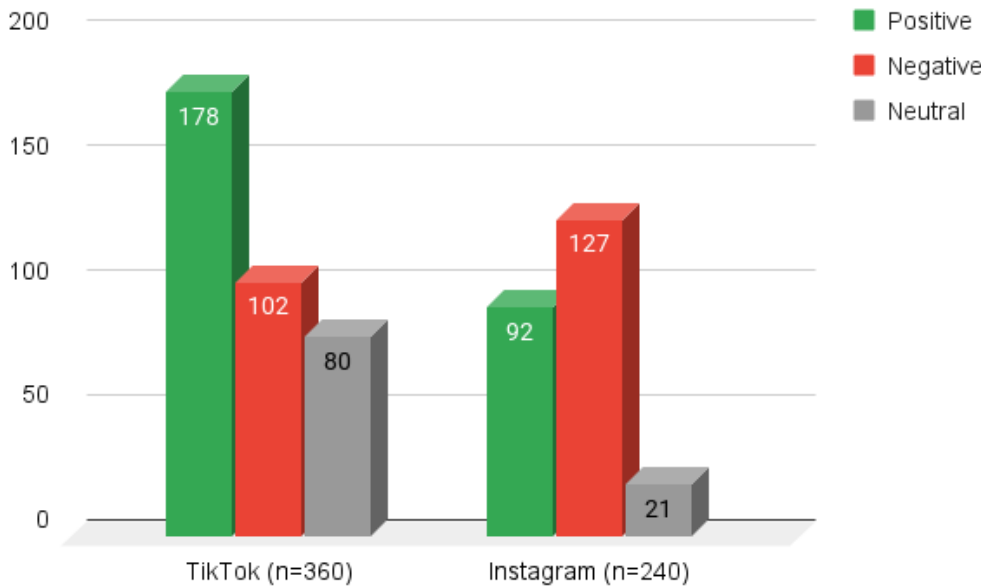
1. Quantitative Sentiment Analysis and Hypothesis Verification

In line with the first research objective, we conducted a quantitative sentiment analysis of the comments ($n = 600$) to identify the audience's emotional reactions. The results demonstrate a pronounced polarization of online sentiment (see Figure 1). Of the total corpus, 45% ($n = 270$) of comments expressed a positive sentiment, 38.2% ($n = 229$) a negative sentiment, and 16.8% ($n = 101$) were neutral. While positive reactions represent the largest single portion, the cumulative share of negative and neutral comments (55%) points to profound ambivalence and considerable tension within online discussions on LGBTQ+ issues amid the war.



A comparative analysis of the platforms revealed statistically significant differences, which is key to verifying Hypothesis 1. On TikTok (n = 360), positive comments were dominant (49.4%), while negative and neutral comments accounted for 28.3% and 22.2%, respectively. This condition confirms the platform’s association with the amplification of solidarity discourses. In contrast, Instagram (n = 240) exhibited an opposite dynamic: negative comments prevailed (52.9%), while positive ones accounted for only 38.3%. This identified contrast between the platforms is not a methodological artifact or a study flaw but a central empirical finding that supports Hypothesis 1 regarding the different nature of online discourses depending on the specifics of the social network and its audience. Furthermore, the pronounced negative tone of online discourse, which contrasts with data from nationwide sociological surveys indicating growing tolerance, provides empirical support for Hypothesis 3 regarding the discrepancy between the tone of online discourse and broader societal trends.

Figure 1.
Comparative Distribution of Comment Sentiment Regarding LGBTQ+ on TikTok and Instagram



2. Dominant Narratives and Their Structure

In accordance with the second research objective, the identification and classification of dominant narratives were conducted (Table 1). Although the quantitative analysis indicated a prevalence of positive comments (45%), the qualitative narrative analysis revealed a significant asymmetry in their structure. Supportive reactions were largely homogeneous, consisting of general statements about equality, which allowed them to engage in a single “narrative of equality.”

In contrast, the negative comments, despite their slightly smaller share (38.2%), exhibited a significantly higher level of narrative complexity and diversity. Drawing upon the methodological definition of a narrative as a stable interpretive framework with its own thematic focus, roles, central conflict, and value-ideological frame, four heterogeneous narratives of



resistance (i.e., those that are diverse in their logic and argumentation) were identified: exclusion, sinfulness, hierarchy of priorities, and threat to children.

The active reproduction of stereotypes and the provocation of chain reactions within these four narratives confirm Hypothesis 2, which posits that negative comments contribute to digital escalation and exacerbate the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ communities.

Table 1.
Structural Analysis of Dominant Narratives in Comments about LGBTQ+ on TikTok and Instagram

Narrative	Structural Components	Example Comments
1. The Narrative of Equality: “LGBTQ+ are People Just Like Everyone Else”	Thematic Focus: Human rights, equality, freedom of expression, support for LGBTQ+ service members. Typical Roles: LGBTQ+ individuals as heroes; supporters as helpers; homophobes as antagonists. Central Conflict: Humanism & Empathy vs. Intolerance & Prejudice. Value/Ideological Frame: Liberal values, recognition of every person’s dignity.	<i>“Love is love. Everyone has the right to be happy.” “Thanks to our LGBTQ+ defenders! Respect.” “Everyone should be equal in their rights.”</i>
2. The Narrative of Exclusion: “They Don’t Belong Here”	Thematic Focus: The very presence of LGBTQ+ individuals in the public sphere. Typical Roles: LGBTQ+ as objects of hatred; commenters as aggressors. Central Conflict: Existence vs. Annihilation/Exile. Value/Ideological Frame: Radical intolerance, assertion of dominance through humiliation.	<i>“F###king f###gots, g#t the f###k out of Ukraine.” “Ew, gay.” “You people need to be cured.”</i>
3. The Narrative of Sinfulness: “LGBTQ+ is a Deviation from God’s Laws”	Thematic Focus: Public visibility of LGBTQ+ as a challenge to religious norms. Typical Roles: LGBTQ+ as sinners; the “traditional family” as a victim; commenters as defenders of faith. Central Conflict: Piety/Nature vs. Sin/Perversion. Value/Ideological Frame: Conservative, religious values; the existence of a single, correct, God-given order.	<i>“This is a sin. God created man and woman.” “Sodom and Gomorrah.” “There is no place for perversion in the Kingdom of God.”</i>
4. The Narrative about Hierarchy of Priorities: “LGBTQ+ is not a Priority Because of the War”	Thematic Focus: LGBTQ+ rights in the context of war. Typical Roles: LGBTQ+ activists as “internal enemies”; true patriots as heroes; commenters as arbiters of relevance. Central Conflict: War/Survival vs. “Inappropriate” rights and activism. Value/Ideological Frame: Militarized patriotism,	<i>“We have a war going on, and you have your parades. Don’t you have anything better to do?” “Send them to the front, not to a parade. Where is the TCR [Territorial Center of Recruitment]?”</i>



	where civic value is defined solely by participation in national defense.	<i>“While our boys are dying, these people are here demanding their rights.”</i>
5. The Narrative of Threat to Children: “LGBTQ+ is Propaganda”	Thematic Focus: The visibility of LGBTQ+ in media as a threat to minors. Typical Roles: LGBTQ+ as seducers; children as innocent victims; commenters as saviors of childhood. Central Conflict: Innocence/Normality vs. Depravity/Ideological Influence. Value/Ideological Frame: Paternalistic anxiety for the future generation, protecting children from “harmful” information.	<i>“This is f###got propaganda that corrupts our children.” “Stop showing this, children are watching.” “Homo-propaganda is a threat to the family.”</i>

3. Associations Between Content Themes and Discursive Practices

In line with the third research objective, the analysis revealed a clear correlation between the themes of the video content and the dominance of specific narratives. Content that integrated LGBTQ+ individuals into socially approved roles activated the narrative of equality. The most positive reactions and support were elicited by videos featuring military service members (e.g., Viktor Pylypenko⁵), endorsements from famous personalities (Olya Polyakova⁶, Anna Trinchet⁷), and discussions about civil partnerships. Conversely, videos that challenged traditional gender norms activated narratives of resistance. Content about transgender people showed the highest level of aggression (particularly a video about a transgender woman’s experience at a recruitment center), gender-nonconforming appearance, and Pride marches. This inference demonstrates a social paradox: a readiness for solidarity with LGBTQ+ individuals who fit the image of a “heroic citizen,” alongside simultaneous resistance to accepting aspects of identities that fall outside heteronormative perceptions.

A deeper qualitative analysis of the comments revealed complex discursive practices underlying these narratives. E.g., the phrase *“Send them to the front, not to a parade”* is not merely a call to action but a complex statement that simultaneously affirms a heteronormative ideal of the citizen-defender and stigmatizes public forms of LGBTQ+ representation. The reactions display a wide range of tones, from overt aggression to restrained support and irony. Even a seemingly neutral comment like *“it is not for me, but let them be”* functions as a form of tolerant distancing that passively reinforces the social norm. Lexical patterns and micro-memes play a distinct role. Phrases like *“don’t you have anything better to do?”* or *“but the children are watching”* operate as recurring formulas that construct a social hierarchy of problems and lend the force of a social norm to condemnation.

In contrast, expressions like *“so proud of you,” “you are not alone,”* and rainbow emojis become markers of solidarity. Sarcasm and self-irony (e.g., *“bring back landline phones!!!”*) are often present in comments, serving as a defense mechanism to discuss taboo topics in a lighter

⁵ PrEP.com.ua, “Gay Serviceman Viktor Pylypenko Responds to Hateful Comments,” Instagram video, December 14, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DDkagEhN1bz/>

⁶ USE PRO TSE, “Olya Polyakova Supported the LGBTIQ Community at a Concert in the Palace of Sports,” TikTok video, October 28, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@pro.sekc/video/7430879639482141958>

⁷ USE PRO TSE, “How Does Anna Trinchet Feel about the LGBT Community?,” TikTok video, April 23, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@pro.sekc/video/7361087307937516806>



tone, simultaneously diffusing and highlighting the existing conflict. These observations reveal the complex, multi-layered structure through which perceptions of LGBTQ+ communities are formed, disseminated, and contested in the digital space during wartime.

Discussion

The results of this study not only affirm the profound polarization within Ukraine's online environment concerning LGBTQ+ issues but also uncover a central paradox of the contemporary digital landscape: various platforms operate as separate social ecosystems, each with its own norms of discourse. Specifically, the conclusion that Instagram serves as an arena for significantly more negative reactions appears, at first glance, to contradict the findings of Andika et al. (2024), who viewed the platform as a tool for promoting inclusivity. However, this discrepancy can be clarified by the unique socio-political context of Ukraine. During full-scale war, social networks have evolved into a space not only for communication but also for expressing collective stress and anxiety (Ye et al., 2023). Plausibly, the higher level of aggression on Instagram – which, through its integration with Facebook, reaches an older and more heterogeneous audience – is a manifestation of this wartime stress, which is channeled into hostility toward the “other.”

Furthermore, this hostility is not an exclusively internal phenomenon; it is fueled and structured by external disinformation campaigns. The narratives of resistance identified in the comments (“sinfulness,” “threat to children,” “not a priority”) largely align with the key messages of Russian propaganda, which purposefully constructs the image of “Gayropa” and uses LGBTQ+ topics to divide Ukrainian society (Bilousenko et al., 2022). Consequently, negative comments are often not so much original thoughts as they are a retransmission of sown narratives, which is a practical manifestation of the securitization of LGBTQ+ communities (Luciani & Shevtsova, 2024). Thus, the data obtained do not refute previous research but rather contextualize it, demonstrating that the role of social media is not static and changes dramatically under the influence of crisis conditions.

At the same time, despite a significant level of negativity, the study's results indicate an important shift toward growing support for LGBTQ+ communities, which is consistent with national data from KIIS (2024) and shows a positive trend compared to the pre-war analysis by the NGO “Insight” (2021). This paradoxical growth in tolerance amidst an existential crisis can be interpreted within the framework of Ukraine's struggle for its own civilizational identity. As stated in the article's title, the war also takes place on an “invisible front” – the front of values. In this context, support for human rights, including LGBTQ+ rights, becomes a marker of belonging to the European democratic world and a conscious dissociation from the authoritarian, homophobic ideology of the aggressor, which instrumentalizes anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric as part of its geopolitical struggle against the West (Luciani & Shevtsova, 2024; Tsaturyan, 2024). The negative narratives identified in this study, such as “threat to children” or “sinfulness,” are concrete examples of the “formula stories” spread through pro-Russian media to construct the image of LGBTQ+ people as “perverts” (Soroka et al., 2022). Thus, the narrative of equality, particularly prominent among a younger audience on TikTok (Romadlon et al., 2022; Berger et al., 2022), is not merely an expression of personal views but also an element of broader civic resistance and national self-determination.

These findings have significant practical implications for the media sphere and digital inclusion policies. For journalists and content creators, the need to transition from simple terminological literacy to narrative competence becomes evident. It means not only using correct terminology but also consciously working to counter dominant narratives of resistance, such as “not a priority” or “a threat to children.” Understanding the phenomenon of “conditional inclusion,” media outlets should strive for the ethical and balanced representation of the full diversity of LGBTQ+ communities, paying special attention to the voices of the most marginalized



groups, particularly transgender people. Concurrently, responsibility also lies with the platforms themselves. Effective moderation must evolve from reacting to individual trigger words to contextual analysis that can recognize entire hostile narratives. Furthermore, to ensure equal opportunities for visibility, greater transparency is needed regarding the algorithmic promotion of “sensitive” content to avoid the potential “shadow banning” of LGBTQ+ topics. Thus, enhancing digital inclusion means creating an environment that guarantees not only the right to presence but also safety from harassment and visibility in the information flow.

Despite the significance of these findings, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this study, which in turn open up prospects for future research. First, the focus on two platforms (TikTok and Instagram) does not allow for the extrapolation of the conclusions to the entire Ukrainian digital space, particularly to specific environments like Telegram or YouTube. Second, although the analysis of viral content allowed for the inclusion of a heterogeneous audience, it does not capture the dynamics within less popular, niche discussions. At the same time, we must emphasize a unique methodological advantage of this work: the researcher’s position as the author of the analyzed content provided full access to all comments, including those automatically hidden or restricted by the platform. It reduced the risk of missing a significant portion of adverse reactions and increased the validity of the data. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to track the evolution of narratives over time and could also expand the analysis to include comparisons with other platforms and content types.

Conclusions

This research, which analyzed the dynamics of narratives within the online discourse on LGBTQ+ communities on Ukrainian social media amid the full-scale war, yielded several key findings. Firstly, we empirically verified that the digital public sphere is not monolithic but consists of fragmented ecosystems: TikTok predominantly functions as a space for solidarity, while Instagram, with its Facebook integration, serves as an arena for considerably higher levels of conflict and animosity (in confirmation of Hypothesis 1). Secondly, five dominant narratives were identified (equality, exclusion, sinfulness, a hierarchy of priorities, and threat to children) that act as instruments for perpetuating stereotypes and escalating conflict, thus confirming Hypothesis 2. Thirdly, the high share of negative comments supports Hypothesis 3, which concerns the discrepancy between the more hostile online discourse and the general rise in tolerance documented by sociological surveys.

The study’s theoretical contribution is the articulation of the “conditional inclusion” phenomenon, wherein acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities is contingent upon their representation conforming to dominant social norms (or prevailing patriotic frameworks). In contrast, the visibility of more marginalized groups (notably transgender individuals) still encounters significant opposition. The practical value of the study lies in formulating recommendations for media and platforms to strengthen digital inclusion by fostering narrative literacy and implementing contextual moderation.

Finally, the analysis of social media comments demonstrates that the fight for equality and human rights is an inseparable component of the victory on the “invisible front” – the battle for values that will shape the future of a democratic and inclusive Ukrainian society.

Declaration of generative artificial intelligence and technologies using artificial intelligence in the writing process. The authors did not use artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of this article. The authors of the article bear full responsibility for the correct use and citation of sources.



References

- Abreu, R. L., & Kenny, M. C. (2018). Cyberbullying and LGBTQ youth: A systematic literature review and recommendations for prevention and intervention. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 11(1), 81–97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-017-0175-7>.
- Alafwan, B., Siallagan, M., & Putro, U. S. (2023). Comments analysis on social media: A review. *EAI Endorsed Transactions on Scalable Information Systems*, 10(6), e3843. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eetsis.3843>.
- Andika, M. F. F., Indriastuti, A., Fithria, K. N., Hernanto, P. A., & Wijayanti, T. (2024). Representation of LGBTQ identity on social media: Multimodality analysis on Instagram account @yayasanganyanusantara. *Jurnal Komunikasi Indonesia*, 13(2), 271–288. <https://doi.org/10.7454/jkmi.v13i2.1232>.
- Barthes, R., & Duisit, L. (1975). An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative. *New Literary History*, 6(2), 237–272. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468419>.
- Berger, M. N., Taba, M., Marino, J. L., Lim, M. S. C., & Skinner, S. R. (2022). Social media use and health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth: Systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 24(9), e38449. <https://doi.org/10.2196/38449>.
- Bilousenko, O., Pivtorak, O., Slyvenko, O., & Iliuk, K. (2022, November 18). «Ти або росіянин, або гей»: Досліджуємо російську ЛІГБТ-дезінформацію у соціальних мережах [“You are either Russian or gay”: Researching Russian LGBT disinformation on social networks]. *Detector Media*. <https://detector.media/monitorynh-internetu/article/204999/2022-11-18-ty-abo-rosiyanyn-abo-gey-doslidzhuemo-rosiysku-lgbt-dezinformatsiyu-u-sotsialnykh-merezhakh/>.
- Blanco-Ruiz, M. Á., & Sainz de Baranda, C. (2018). Channels produced by LGBTQ+ YouTubers: Gender discourse analysis. *Observatorio (OBS)*, 12(SPE1), 97–121. <https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS0001386>.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448619>.
- Burke, K. (1945). *A grammar of motives*. Prentice-Hall.
- Carvalho, P., Caled, D., Silva, C., Batista, F., & Ribeiro, R. (2023). The expression of hate speech against Afro-descendant, Roma, and LGBTQ+ communities in YouTube comments. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 12(2), 171–206. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00085.car>.
- Council of Europe. (1950). *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*. https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_eng.
- Craig, S. L., Eaton, A. D., McInroy, L. B., Leung, V. W. Y., & Krishnan, S. (2021). Can social media participation enhance LGBTQ+ youth well-being? Development of the Social Media Benefits Scale. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988931>.
- Eickers, G. (2024). Social Media Experiences of LGBTQ+ People: Enabling Feelings of Belonging. *Topoi*, 43, 617–630. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-023-09994-3>.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London and New York: Longman.
- Gross, L. (2001). *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America*. Columbia University Press.
- Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage Publications; Open University Press.
- Hayman, K. (2024). A discourse of hate: A content analysis of responses to queer representation in online social media. *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de la Jeunesse*, 16(1), 109–116. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy30026>.
- Insight Public Organization. (2021). Rights, religion and children: What topics fuel online discussions about LGBTQ+ in Ukraine [Report]. <https://www.insight-ukraine.org/special/commentsLGBT/>.
- Jones, T. (2020). Double-use of LGBT youth in propaganda. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 17(4), 408–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2019.1670121>.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>.



- Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. (2024). Perception of LGBT people and their rights in Ukraine: Analytical report (May 2024). <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=1417&lang=uk>.
- Luciani, L., & Shevtsova, M. (2024). Sexuality securitized: how Russia's invasion of Ukraine reconfigures (anti-)LGBTQ politics in Eastern Europe. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 34(5), 655–668. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2427198>.
- Margalit, A. (2019). Still a blind spot: The protection of LGBT persons during armed conflict and other situations of violence. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 100(907–909), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383119000201>.
- McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2017). Perspectives of LGBTQ emerging adults on the depiction and impact of LGBTQ media representation. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(1), 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1184243>.
- Neuendorf, K. A. (2017). *The content analysis guidebook* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802878>.
- On the Principles of Preventing and Combating Discrimination in Ukraine, Law of Ukraine No. 5207-VI. (2012). Retrieved from <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/5207-17>.
- Randev, D. (2022). Role of the media in an unequal world: LGBTQ gender identity and portrayal. *Journal of Media, Culture and Communication*, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.55529/jmcc.21.1.7>.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. SAGE Publications.
- Romadlon, F. N., Ayuningtyas, G., & Sundayani, R. (2022). The effect of LGBT's content in TikTok on the acceptance of LGBT by college students in a campus environment. *Makna: Jurnal Kajian Komunikasi, Bahasa, dan Budaya*, 10(1), 50–58. <https://doi.org/10.33558/makna.v10i1.2494>.
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446288719>.
- Shevtsova, M. (2017). Learning the Lessons from the Euromaidan: The ups and downs of LGBT Activism in the Ukrainian public sphere. *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, (3), 157–180. <https://doi.org/10.18523/kmplj120123.2017-3.157-180>.
- Soroka, Y., Crawley, S., Dzyuba, O., & Green, A. (2023). Perverts or heroes in the post-socialist “Cold War”: Formula stories of lesbian/bisexual/queer women and transgender people in Ukrainian media. *Symbolic Interaction*, 46(2), 133–158. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.627>.
- Template for analyzing comments on LGBTQ+ content on social media: Coding scheme for a research project. (2025). [Google Sheets spreadsheet]. Retrieved from <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1J9ys8RKPW-0Vt4w6jCw7N7YqDXNQ0qtowW1YEjPnj9g>.
- Teteriuk, M. (2016). Between ‘the Russian World’ and ‘the Ukrainian Nation’: Kyiv Pride before and after Euromaidan. *Transit Online*.
- Tsaturyan, A. (2024). Visualizing the Emergence of Political Homophobia: Anti-LGBTQ+ and Anti-Ukrainian Sentiment in Russian Public Opinion. *Socius*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231241234622>.
- United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.
- Verpoest, L. (2018). Geopolitical Othering Versus Normative Isomorphism? LGBTI Rights in Russia and Ukraine. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 23(SI), 139–157. <https://doi.org/10.54648/ceer2018015>.
- Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. (2025). Draft Law on Amendments to the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offenses and the Criminal Code of Ukraine on Combating Discrimination, No. 13597 (Registered Draft). Legislation of Ukraine. Retrieved September 25, 2025, from <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billinfo/Bills/Card/56933>.
- Ye, J., Jindal, N., Pierri, F., & Luceri, L. (2023). Online networks of support in distressed environments: Solidarity and mobilization during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Proceedings of the ICWSM Workshops 2023*. <https://doi.org/10.36190/2023.05>.