

Appreciation of Black Humour Memes in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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This study examines three black humour memes and their reception on social media during the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It seeks to identify the conditions that facilitate or impede the appreciation of jokes about the enemy's death. Conceptual integration theory and Bandura's social cognitive theory of moral agency provide the methodological framework for analysing the memes, and the responses to them. The findings offer an explanatory model for understanding when aggressive jokes are well-received or rejected. Successful humour transactions often involve humourists providing cues that encourage viewers to deactivate empathy towards the joke's target. These cues may include euphemistic labelling, dehumanisation, or shared conventions about the consequences of the humour. Such triggers align with Bandura's patterns of moral disengagement. The interaction between these triggers and the background knowledge of the audience can either lead to the appreciation of the humour or a conflict of values that results in the joke being dismissed. Humour is generally well-received when both the humourists and the audience agree on the need to undermine the power of the target and believe in the delivery of retribution for perceived wrongs. Conversely, if the target is perceived as valiant or vulnerable, the humour is often rejected as offensive or in poor taste.



Introduction

Scholars have often noted the use of aggressive humour as a coping mechanism for individuals facing difficult circumstances (Frankl, 2006 [1946]; Adams, 2005; Herzog, 2011 [2006]; Dance, 2011; de Montmorency, 2020; Dynel & Poppi, 2021; Sover, 2021). It is arguable whether, in times of hardship, the oppressed necessarily use humour to express defiance (Herzog, 2011[2006]; 't Hart, 2007; Stanoev, 2009). Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that humour may convey hope for a better future (Friedman & Friedman, 2017; Sover, 2021), suppress fear (Obrdlík, 1942; Sorensen, 2008), bond like-minded individuals (Stanoev, 2009; Dynel & Poppi, 2021), and provide a vent for aggression (Adams, 2005; Kuipers, 2005; Herzog, 2011[2006]).

Historical examples illustrate this use of humour in oppressive contexts. During the Holocaust, Jews reportedly joked about Hitler's death as a form of resistance (de Montmorency, 2020). Soviet dissidents and Gulag prisoners similarly used jokes about Stalin to maintain morale (Waterlow, 2018). Obrdlík (1942) described how the so-called 'gallows humour' helped Czechs to forge in-group cohesion at the time of the German occupation. This type of humour included jokes about gravediggers and cemeteries that offered exclusive services for Hitler and Germans.

Obrdlík argued that the term gallows humour had been typically used in relation to the humour of the nations that experienced oppression from invaders (Obrdlík, 1942: 709–710). According to him, the literal meaning of the term evoked the scene of innocent victims who were sent to the gallows by a dictator but continued hoping for a rescue miracle. In these circumstances, gallows humour was adopted as a tool of psychological liberation. By mocking their persecutors, the oppressed asserted their resilience and contempt towards the aggressors.

If gallows humour conventionally refers to the jokes made by the oppressed, its close associate, black humour, has been used to describe tragic and sinister subjects such as death, disease, handicap, or warfare (Willinger, et al., 2017: 160). It is hard to locate authors of jokes about disastrous matters since such jokes can travel across time and cultures. Black humour becomes a more useful term when we deal with gruesome topics but cannot find the authors of the joke.

Both black humour and gallows humour allow those in dire situations to build a sense of superiority over their adversaries. This function of black humour became indispensable when the Ukrainian sphere of social media was shaping its reaction to the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022. The invasion was a significant escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War that began in 2014. Ukrainians widely employed black humour through memes to show their defiance and to disparage the invaders. The

memes effectively combined visual and verbal elements to convey messages that might be deemed too harsh or unacceptable if expressed solely in words (Bounegru & Forceville, 2011: 224; Godioli, 2020: 2). As ‘virally-transmitted cultural artefacts’ reflecting shared social norms and values (Shifman, 2013: 15), memes have become, so this study argues, a powerful medium for both storytelling and social commentary and thus deserve heightened scholarly attention in the humour-human rights research nexus.

Many of the memes disseminated during the Russo-Ukrainian war were novel, however, numerous memes adapted recyclable images that had been previously used as building blocks in digital jokes. In addition, there were anonymous meme creators who modified existing verbal jokes about past events and political leaders. Such adaptations demonstrate the continuity of the practice of using black humour in response to oppression and traumatic events.

A notable example is the meme that was disseminated in pro-Ukrainian sections of Facebook. It repurposed a Jewish joke about the day of Hitler’s death. The Jewish joke told a story about Hitler consulting an astrologer about the date of his death and receiving the enigmatic answer that his death would occur on a big Jewish holiday. He was not able to find out the specific day because the astrologer predicted the big Jewish holiday would be proclaimed the very day that Hitler died (de Montmorency, 2020: 37). Ukrainian or pro-Ukrainian netizens translated the joke into Ukrainian. In addition, they replaced culture-specific names such as Hitler and the Jewish holiday with their Russo-Ukrainian equivalents. The creators of the meme also illustrated the verbal joke with a picture of the then-alive oppositionist Alexei Navalny putting flowers next to Putin’s coffin in Red Square. New variants do not change the plot of old jokes but align existing perspectives with a modern outlook (Arkhipova, 2009 a and b). Sometimes, they amend the preceding storyline.

The practice of using and recycling memes for social commentary exemplifies stages of humour transaction defined as ‘processes by which what is generally called humour is created, communicated, experienced, responded to and used’ (Milner Davis & Hoffman, 2023: 323). Adoption of this concept into a research framework enables us to assess different issues related to the production and reception of jokes such as those which incorporate aggressive references.

The topic of physical violence, for example, has been actively explored in memes whose protagonists were either fictional characters representing soldiers, zealous patriots and their children, or they were recognisable individuals. The targeting of specific individuals is usually associated with immoral practices such as bullying

and harassment (Thornberg et al., 2020). At a time of war, however, any harm to the enemy camp is conventionally perceived as a desirable development mostly beyond reprehension.

Even in the context of war, questions arise about whether alleged perpetrators should be protected by rules of 'civilised' communication imposed by some social media platforms. Another contentious issue concerning the use of hostile jokes arises with respect to the targets at whose expense jokes can be made. Some participants in public discussions of memes accuse the creators of black humour memes and their supporters of different types of asocial behaviour. Kuipers (2005: 75), in her studies of humorous responses to the September 11 attack, concluded that the function of aggressive memes could be viewed differently by different people, and often fluctuates between coping and expressing hostility.

A study of hostile humorous memes and reactions helps to uncover the boundaries of jokes beyond which a humourist risks inflicting adversarial reactions and provoking social sanctions such as their expulsion from a public space. For these purposes, memes in which the death of the target was sought after were selected for the analysis in this study. The selected memes celebrate retribution that has been instantiated in a metaphorical death sentence for violent aggressors or for those who are perceived as such.

Their messages suggest that invaders, their leaders, and even passive bystanders will be held accountable for the war crimes committed by their compatriots. Here, the themes that are used often draw on expressions like the Russian idiom 'Whoever comes to us with a sword will perish by the sword' and similar sentiments from the New Testament (Majdzinska-Koszorowicz & Ostanina-Olszewska, 2023: 127). Creators and appreciative audiences of these memes denigrate alleged evil perpetrators who lack humanity and hence, are undeserving of empathy.

This investigation thus uses three memes containing aggressive and disparaging references as case studies to explore the acceptance and rejection of black humour in the context of war. One meme depicts a creative method for assassinating the Russian President by using a shopping bag (Lviv portal, 2014; Pezduza, 2024). Another meme references a Ukrainian fundraiser's initiative to hire a fictional hitman to end the war (Matvienko_makcoach, n.d.; Student_help_ukr, 2022). The third meme portrays a mission assigned by the Ukrainian Security Service to an anthropomorphised shark (Censor.net, 2023; DiscoYourDream, 2023). These case studies aim to shed light on the conditions that lead to successful humour transactions endorsing aggressive jocular statements and to those transactions that result in the rejection of the vengeance narrative.

In doing so, this study presents an attempt to investigate whether fragmentations of the discourse community engaged in discussions of memes could correlate with patterns of moral disengagement explored by Albert Bandura and those who subscribe to his theories (Bandura et al., 1996). Bandura's socio-cognitive explanatory model shows that the justification of violence and death typically involves a process of self-regulation. Through this process, individuals attempt to validate their aggression to make their ruthless behaviour socially acceptable. Disengagement involves several socio-cognitive mechanisms that have been observed in studies of bullying, harassment, excessive punitive responses to tragic events, and the execution of criminal orders (Bandura, 2016; Bandura et al., 1996; Aquino et al., 2007; Thornberg et al., 2020).

Millner Davis (2003) extends the application of this theory to instances of production and reception of hostile humour, therefore laying the groundwork for an exploration of the positive aspects of moral disengagement. Such situations may involve efforts to cope with extreme stress and to create a bond with a community of shared values. Drawing on her insights, the study analyses the structure of aggressive memes and catalogues the verbal and visual responses to them. The aim is to check which patterns of moral disengagement gained relevance and why these mechanisms were not activated in the comments of those who rejected the humour.

The paper is organized into six sections. The following section describes the research methodology. It outlines the theoretical framework, which includes conceptual integration theory and Bandura's social cognitive theory. It also details the stages of analysis, beginning with the selection of my case studies, followed by an interpretation of the memes, identification of triggers for moral disengagement, and a review of reactions to the memes. Section 3 focuses on the interpretation of the memes. Section 4 examines positive audience reactions, linking them to the activation of moral disengagement. Section 5 explores negative reactions, analysing why some viewers reject the humour. Section 6 discusses the findings, elaborating on the impacts of black humour during the war and suggesting directions for future research in the field.

It needs to be emphasised that this paper focuses on unfolding discursive segments centred around the memes I have selected for analysis. Even though this study applies a psychological model of social learning, it uses this model to locate the aggregate beliefs, values and emotions of the participants in discussions. It does not use this model to speculate about the internal psychological processes or personality types of those affected by the memes' publications.

Methodology

Selection of memes

This study was conducted in several stages. The first began with the selection of relevant materials from social media. Over two years, the author collected black humour memes posted by Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian users on Facebook who overtly supported Ukraine, encouraged discussions of diverse topics, and posted a variety of news items. The memes were initially located in day-to-day Facebook newsfeeds that did not carry hashtags or any specific markers. It should be noted that Facebook posts and comments have often been removed for various reasons and, thus, references to Facebook discussions have not been provided in this article. The same memes were circulated on other social media platforms, such as Twitter (X), Instagram and Pinterest.

Initially, a corpus of 45 memes with a reference to death was collected to analyse the use of multimodal resources for innocuous packaging of aggressive wishes. 23 memes from the corpus contained a death wish for an actual person who personified the war, i.e., Putin, Lukashenka, and Shoigu. 13 memes from the corpus targeted fictional characters representing Russian soldiers, as well as children whose parents were ready to sacrifice them. This corpus also included 9 memes from the series portraying a shark attack on a Russian tourist in Egypt.

3 memes were selected for analysis in this paper since they represent interesting cases of war propaganda narratives targeting individuals who were perceived to be responsible for the barbarous war. The memes selected for analysis have common features: (i) they contain a death reference; (ii) the aggression is directed at a real person; and (iii) they have been mentioned in the official Ukrainian media and news portals (Parubiy 2016; Kosharska 2022; Gazeta.ua 2022; Logunov and Nekrecha 2023; Druzenko 2023). These memes fall under the category of hostile humour, which is characterised by targeting an individual or group to humiliate, insult, or cause embarrassment (Chan et al., 2016: 2; Ritchie, 2009: 277).

The selected memes celebrate the death of a real person and therefore clash with the conventional norms of ethics which condemn homicide and its glorification. The memes about Putin's murder could be linked to the two categories of digital jokes which Kuipers (2005: 75) uncovered in her research of humour about September 11. Meme 1 is reminiscent of 'sick jokes' containing a clash of incongruous domains. Meme 2 belongs to aggressive and degrading jokes which adapt images of the American/global popular culture.

Mememes 1 and 2 showcase the confrontation and destruction of the epitome of evil since Putin became ‘the villain to be blamed for all the war atrocities: he is an opposition to the entire world, both in actual conflict as well as in the memes’ (Laineste & Fiadotava, 2023: 54). The two memes about Putin in this paper do not have analogues in the corpus of memes on the topic offered by Laineste & Fiadotava (2023) or Majdzinska-Koszorowicz & Ostanina-Olszewska (2022). They also do not overlap with the Putin jokes collected by Arkhipova (2009 b).

The third meme stands out in the corpus as it celebrates death through the reinterpretation of a real-life event involving a shark attack on a Russian tourist in an Egyptian holiday resort. It does not have analogues either in Kuipers’ corpus of disaster jokes or among memes about the Ukrainian war collected by Majdzinska-Koszorowicz & Ostanina-Olszewska (2022) or Laineste & Fiadotava (2023). The shark attack meme utilises a four-panel format to deliver a complex narrative about the perceived causation of wartime events in which even forces of nature side with the victims of the war. This group of memes sparked heated debate among Ukrainians about the morality of finding humour in the death of an innocent person (Druzenko, 2023; Logunov & Nekrecha, 2023).

The three selected memes belong to different categories of jokes celebrating death at the time of a disaster. The memes are more than just threatening messages like complaints or criticism (cf. Al Zidjaly, 2017). They celebrate the death of a warmonger or a perceived enemy. The analysis of these memes unveils certain mechanisms engaged in the acceptance/rejection of taboo topics.

Content analysis of meme messages

The second stage of this study involved analysing the content of the memes to understand their messages. Each meme was given a descriptive title summarising its content: (1) ‘A Shopping Bag with a Noose Around Putin’s Neck’, (2) ‘Leon the Hitman Receives a “Wet” Job Order from Ukrainian Fundraiser Serhiy Prytula’, and (3) ‘A Shark Offsets EU Inefficiency and Becomes an Agent of the Ukrainian Security Forces to Punish Russians’.

To interpret these memes, the author employed conceptual integration theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998; Coulson, 2001; 2022) and studies on visual literacy (Ventola & Guijarro, 2009; Bounegru & Forceville, 2011; Schilperoord, 2018). These frameworks help explain the cognitive processes involved in humour and how people understand and interpret multimodal humour, acknowledging that the meaning of such humour can vary greatly among individuals (Kuipers, 2011).

The content analysis focused on how the memes use conceptual blending to create their messages, combining multiple semantic domains or matrices to form either a novel conceptualisation of familiar objects or a scenario of desired events. These experiential domains activate different forms of knowledge, such as encyclopaedic knowledge of routine actions and objects or intertextual references to familiar events, quotes, and cultural data. The initial step in the content analysis was to identify these semantic matrices that were presented visually or verbally (Ventola & Guijarro, 2009).

Additionally, the analysis focused on understanding how the humour in the selected memes arises from incongruities between their structural elements. This study is based on the idea that humour frequently stems from a discrepancy between what is expected and what actually occurs (Attardo, 2002). In the memes analysed, humourists achieved this effect by extracting specific elements—such as words, images, or scenarios—from their typical or familiar context and recontextualising them in an unexpected or contrasting setting. For example, they might place a serious political figure in an unrealistically absurd situation, or they might use a well-known phrase in an ironic or subversive way. This unexpected pairing or juxtaposition creates a surprise or clash that disrupts the audience's usual understanding, thereby generating humour.

The content of all the memes aimed to denigrate the target, typically the Russian President or a representative of the Russian nation, often by entertainingly depicting their death. The author hypothesised that appreciating this type of humour requires the audience to undergo a self-adjustment process, as expressing a wish for someone's death violates social taboos against publicly voicing harmful or criminal intentions. Under normal circumstances, such expressions would provoke feelings of guilt and be condemned by moral authorities. However, when a group of likely-minded persons enjoys these cruel jokes, they presumably activate a mechanism of moral disengagement (Milner Davis, 2003). In the analysed situations of reacting to humorous memes, moral self-adjustment was also enhanced by the brutal circumstances of the war. The change of the attitude toward the target and preservation of ethical norms can be exemplified by a comment to one of the memes on social media: 'We, Ukrainians, are people who have a lot of empathy but we don't waste it on Russians as they are not human'.

According to Bandura, the components of moral disengagement include: (a) moral justification, where harmful means are seen as serving a higher moral purpose; (b) euphemistic labelling, which makes aggressive behaviour sound less severe; (c) advantageous or palliative comparison, which downplays a bad act by comparing it to something worse; (d) displacement of responsibility, where individuals view their

actions as directed by authorities; (e) diffusion of responsibility, where responsibility is diluted among a group; (f) distorting the consequences, where the negative impact of an action is minimised or ignored; (g) dehumanisation, where victims are stripped of human qualities; and (h) victim-blaming, where victims are seen as responsible for their own suffering (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 2016; Thornberg et al., 2020).

The author hypothesised that the content of the memes might feature several elements that deactivate or lessen one's empathy. Corresponding to Bandura's model, this would include such aspects as (b) euphemistic labelling of death or its unusual visualisation; (d) references to moral authorities endorsing hostility towards the target; (e) an acknowledgement of group support that diffuses individual responsibility; (f) presentation styles that downplay the consequences of aggressive intentions; and (g) depictions of the target that strip them of human qualities, suggesting they are undeserving of empathy. Elements (b) and (f) could be interconnected, and both (d) and (e) serve to alleviate viewers' feelings of personal responsibility for endorsing harm.

Therefore, the analysis of meme content focused on identifying the following elements: (1) the semantic matrices contributing to the overall meaning and prompting nonchalant reactions; (2) the incongruity between meme elements that trigger humour; (3) how aggressive intentions are represented (i.e., euphemistic labelling); (4) anticipated outcomes of aggressive behaviour; (5) cues indicating collective endorsement of aggression; and (6) methods of dehumanising the target. Each meme may contain a different set of triggers for moral disengagement, necessitating a nuanced analysis of their content.

Analysis of reactions

The analysis of viewers' reactions to the memes aimed to understand how viewers engaged with the content and whether they exhibited signs of moral disengagement when approving the memes. Using Google image search engines helped locate discussions about the selected memes on various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and Pinterest. The analysis began by categorising reactions as either positive or negative. In total, 348 comments, comprising 3,560 words and 22 images, were analysed. Of these, 213 comments related to the shark attack meme, 71 to Meme 2, and 64 to Meme 1. As noted earlier, Meme 3 provoked heated debates.

Most comments were written in Ukrainian and Russian, although the choice of language did not necessarily indicate the commenter's national identity, given that many people in post-Soviet countries use Russian as a lingua franca. Additionally, some Russians may have used Google Translate to write in Ukrainian, possibly for provocative purposes. All comments were translated by the author and presented

here in English. Identifying the demographics of the discourse communities was not feasible, and statistical analysis could not provide reliable insights due to significant variations across discussion threads. Russian trolls may twist the ratio of positive and negative reactions, though reportedly, they prefer to comment on Twitter (X) accounts (Stukal et al., 2022). The rate of approval and disapproval often depended on the composition of echo chambers that displayed the memes.

Memes 1 and 2 had positive mentions in the official Ukrainian media. Whereas Meme 3 attracted a critical reception and concerns expressed by Ukrainian public figures (Druzenko, 2023; Logunov & Nekrecha, 2023). Consequently, this research focused on a qualitative analysis of the manifestations of moral disengagement components.

There are limitations to this study, as it cannot fully capture the range of mental reactions each commenter might have experienced in response to the memes. The analysis was limited to self-reported reactions expressed by members of various discussion groups. Interpreting these responses posed additional challenges, which the author addressed through established analytical procedures.

A pilot study revealed that positive comments fell into several clusters: (1) general endorsement of the content; (2) characterisation of the target of jokes; and (3) engagement with others who might appreciate the joke. Comments characterising the target often blended several moral disengagement components, such as (a) moral justification; (c) palliative comparison; and (h) victim-blaming. Moral justification and palliative comparison are frequently intertwined, as they both suggest why the world would be better off without the targeted individual. The distinction between them is subtle: moral justification is typically tied to retribution for past actions, while palliative comparison is often linked to preventing future harm.

Correspondingly, the positive reactions to the memes were summarised across the following themes: (1) general expressions of appreciation; (2) characterisation of the target or victim-blaming; (3) moral justification or advantageous comparisons; (4) suggestions of shared responsibility for unethical intentions; and (5) references to moral authorities.

Negative comments were grouped into the following categories: (1) disapproval of the humourists and their audience; (2) objections to the choice of the target; and (3) objections to the messages conveyed by the memes. These groupings allowed for identifying the primary reasons for rejecting the humour, which generally fell into two broad categories: objections based on moral grounds and those triggered by political views.

The interpretations of the memes and the reactions they elicited provide insights into the factors that either facilitated or hindered the appreciation of humour within the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Meme Messages

While all three case studies celebrate the death of an enemy, they differ in their choice and representation of the enemy, and representation of the death scene. Meme 1 mimics an advertisement or a user manual, whereas Memes 2 and 3 tell stories with temporal and cause-and-effect sequences.

A shopping bag with a noose around Putin's neck

Meme 1 surfaced in posts by Ukrainian users immediately after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion. It features a two-panel image of a shopping bag with a picture of Putin's face on its side. The meme was often shared with captions like 'We offer you a new shopping bag which takes care of anger management' or 'The most popular item at markets', though sometimes it was posted without any accompanying text. The bag's handles are designed to resemble a rope, which in the first panel appears loosely around Putin's neck and, in the second panel, tightens like a noose. Notably, this visual joke existed before the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and was later shared across various social media platforms.

Meme 1 is based on a clash of incongruous domains. Even though almost all of the digital jokes of the Russo-Ukrainian war invoke a similar clash, the 'humorous clash jokes' analysed by Kuipers (2005: 75) have 2 peculiarities: (a) one of the incongruous domains involves a day-to-day experience which does not have any connection with a tragedy; and (b) memes are deliberately immoral.

It can be argued that Meme 1 contains the features of the humorous clash jokes. One of its incongruous domains, the domain of shopping, '[is] very remote from the extraordinary events' and 'is felt to be incompatible with the serious nature of a disaster' (Kuipers, 2005: 76). Similar to the humorous clash jokes, Meme 1 is deliberately amoral and does not contain any empathy (Kuipers, 2005: 77). At the same time, Meme 1 fuses the humorous clash with aggressive/degrading references. It carries a vengeance message which purports to 'dethrone a villain' (Laineste & Fiadotava, 2023: 39) by degrading his status. The meme allows the humourists and their audience to look down on the protagonist and perceive him as a weak and non-threatening character. Thus, it has similarities with degrading jokes which provide to the audience an opportunity to have fun at expense of someone who is perceived as evil perpetrator (Kuipers, 2005: 77)

The meme is formatted to resemble an advertisement for a product being promoted by its manufacturer or distributor, blending two conceptual matrices. The first matrix involves a shopping bag featuring a decorative portrait of a ‘celebrity’ on its side, with strings or handles that can be tightened when the bag is full. The second matrix evokes a script of execution or assassination, suggesting an act of hanging, either as personal revenge or as capital punishment carried out by societal institutions. The picture of Putin on the bag stands in for a real person, while the handles mimic a noose or hanging rope. These visual elements combine to suggest a darkly humorous extension of the bag’s function to include a mock execution.

By activating the matrices of shopping and murder, the meme creates a hybrid object that humorously implies even a child could dispose of one of the world’s most powerful leaders. Although the imagery strongly resembles an execution, the death it depicts is symbolic, expressing a hostile attitude towards Putin rather than outlining a literal assassination plan. The meme’s impact is limited to this symbolic gesture and cannot be equated with an actual call to murder a world leader or a direct expression of violent intent.

The meme further diminishes Putin’s humanity by portraying him not as a real person but as a mere image on a shopping bag. Typically, people do not extend empathy towards a picture, particularly one on an everyday object like a bag. This depiction effectively dehumanises or debases Putin, reducing his identity to a caricature that serves as a receptacle for anger and disdain.

Similar memes that depict symbolic executions of Putin are prevalent in the pro-Ukrainian sections of Facebook and Twitter (X), contributing to a broader trend of using humour to cope with the conflict and express resistance against Russian aggression.

Leon the Hitman receives a ‘wet’ job order from a Ukrainian fundraiser

The interpretation of Meme 2 relies on the viewer’s familiarity with popular culture and the current situation in Ukraine. The meme uses a scene from Luc Besson’s film *Léon: The Professional* (1994), featuring Leon, a hitman portrayed by Jean Reno, and his twelve-year-old companion Mathilda, played by Natalie Portman.

The meme is divided into two panels. In the first panel, Serhiy Prytula, a Ukrainian showman and fundraiser for the Ukrainian Army, is depicted speaking on the phone in Ukrainian, saying: ‘Yes, I’ve already raised the required amount [of money]’. The second panel shows Leon and Mathilda with their belongings, suggesting they are on their way to a new destination. In this panel, Mathilda asks Leon in Ukrainian, ‘So we’re [going] to [M]oscow now?’ Leon responds affirmatively: ‘Yes. Prytula has paid for this “order”’.

In humorous responses to September 11, aggressive jokes that adapt images from American popular culture were used ‘to block the feeling of involvement’ and substitute the perception of a gloomy reality with the experience provided by the American entertainment industry (Kuipers, 2005: 81–82). Meme 2 is not quite consistent with the category description. It includes a scene from an American blockbuster movie, but the scene has become an ‘image macro’ which is defined as ‘a picture with words superimposed on it that is shared on social media’ (Coulson, 2022: 277). The image macro with Jean Reno impersonating Leon the Hitman has been used to deliver dissatisfaction with politicians or dangerous situations worldwide. The Google images tools reveal that the latest use of the image macro was a message of condemnation for Orban who is perceived as Putin’s ally. In Meme 2, the image macro is used for an innocuous packaging of a plan of how to end the war. The image macro has also been adapted to convey an appraisal of crowdfunding initiatives in Ukraine and their contribution to the country’s defence.

To fully understand the meme, viewers must make two inferences. The first inference concerns the nature of the ‘order’ Prytula has allegedly paid Leon for. Given that Leon is a hitman, as indicated by the film’s title, the viewer can infer that the ‘order’ refers to an assassination.

The second inference pertains to the identity of the intended target. The dialogue between Leon and Mathilda suggests that the target is someone residing in Moscow, the official residence of the Russian President. Given the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the role of Vladimir Putin as the instigator, the viewer can reasonably deduce that the target is Putin. The meme implies that the most wanted man in Ukraine is President Putin, and it humorously suggests that Ukrainians would be willing to contribute to a fundraiser aimed at financing his assassination.

There is a humorous incongruity in combining the real-world figure of Prytula with a fictional character from a movie. This incongruity arises from the unlikely scenario of a fictional Italian-American hitman collaborating with a Ukrainian actor and fundraiser. The incongruity can be resolved by imagining a revised plot for the film in which Leon’s new mission is set against the backdrop of the Russo-Ukrainian war, assigned to him by the Ukrainian comedian Prytula.

This interpretation leads to the conclusion that Serhiy Prytula could hypothetically raise enough money from the Ukrainian public not only for military equipment like Bayraktar drones but also for an assassination that could alter the course of history. The blending of these two unlikely scenarios (the film’s plot and Prytula’s fundraising efforts) is likely to amuse the audience. Both conflating domains of Meme 2 (fundraising for ammunition and an episode from a thriller) have an aggressive underpinning. Many viewers in the discussion threads express admiration for the

boldness of such an improbable combination. The meme also provides additional sources of amusement: solving the mystery of the hitman's target, appreciating Prytula's clever choice of a professional for the 'wet job' that was euphemistically named 'the order', and the implication that Ukrainians are capable of almost anything.

Meme 2 also invokes the concept of 'diluted responsibility' for the 'immoral' desire, as many people have hypothetically contributed money to the cause. Alternatively, the responsibility for the assassination could be shifted to Serhiy Prytula, who is transparent about the purposes of his fundraising.

Regarding the component of 'dehumanisation', the anonymity of the target removes any semblance of empathy for the individual about to be assassinated by a charismatic character in a thriller, based on an order from a famous Ukrainian fundraiser. The meme also reflects a unique manifestation of 'distorted consequences' of the revealed aggression, as the result of the hitman's task is viewed merely as an unexpected plot twist in a well-known film rather than a concrete action plan. Leon and Mathilda are fictional characters, whose involvement cues an assassination scenario.

The meme 'Prytula Paid Leon the Hitman' illustrates how notable episodes in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, such as the remarkable efforts of volunteers and large-scale crowdfunding initiatives led by popular fundraisers, have been woven into jokes. Similar memes also express recurring desires of people who fantasise about eliminating the war's instigator and seeking a hitman to fulfil their vision. Memes depicting Putin's death scenes, like Meme 1, and those introducing potential assassins, deliver a symbolic verdict against the warmonger, which has resonated with many viewers. The image macro with Leon the Hitman and Matilda is a metonymic device which cues the topic of assassination. This image macro forms a contrast with the 9/11 digital jokes that provide many graphic images of physical aggression such as the picture of Bin Laden's severed head eaten by an American eagle (Kuipers, 2005: 78).

A shark offsets the EU inefficiency and becomes an agent of the Ukrainian security forces to punish Russians

Meme 3 belongs to a group of memes that glorify a shark for siding with Ukraine in the war and aiding the Ukrainian cause. Many memes from this thematic cycle reference the death of a 24-year-old illustrator from Arkhangelsk, who was fatally attacked by a shark in the Egyptian resort city of Hurghada. The attack, witnessed by his father and other tourists, was captured on video and circulated on social media, sparking numerous controversial jokes among Ukrainians celebrating the death of what they perceived as another Russian aggressor.

Meme 3 is composed of four panels that depict a sequence of events in a fantastical storyline. This meme is introduced through a comment, “‘Tasty. Period’”: In Egypt, a shark ate a Russian man when he decided to swim in the Red Sea. Ukraine has only two allies—Mister Cider and the shark!’ The mention of Mister Cider alludes to the incident of poisoning with an adulterated cider that killed 30 people in Russia. The comment refers to the Ukrainian celebration of accidental Russian deaths. The images on the four panels further establish a cause-and-effect relationship between unrelated scenes, unified by the decision of an anthropomorphised shark. At least two of these panels have also been used as standalone memes.

The first panel shows a scene resembling a United Nations Security Council meeting, where officials are supposedly discussing the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory. The caption in Ukrainian reflects a helpless reaction from the United Nations: ‘We do not know how to punish Russians’.

The second panel features an anthropomorphised shark, who announces its decision with the caption: ‘I know!’ This implies that the shark, having overheard the UN’s indecisiveness, has decided to take matters into its own ‘hands’ and help the Ukrainians. The juxtaposition of these panels suggests that even a shark is more proactive and concerned about the fate of Ukraine than the United Nations.

The third panel shows a blurred image of the Russian man in the sea moments before his death, with an anthropomorphised shark superimposed over the photo. The shark is depicted with a thumbs-up gesture and the slogan of the largest Russian fast-food chain *Vkusno i Tochka* [Tasty. Period]. This fast-food chain came into being after re-branding McDonald’s restaurants which pulled out of Russia in protest against the war in Ukraine. This slogan highlights the national identity of the victim and implies that, while consuming the Russian man for a shark may be as hazardous as fast-food meals for humans, it is still ‘tasty’.

The final panel shows the shark alongside Vasyl Malyuk, the Head of the Ukrainian Security Service, who is either hugging or stroking the shark. This friendly gesture suggests that the shark is an agent of the Ukrainian Security Service and is being praised for its actions.

Meme 3 presents a scenario where an anthropomorphised shark steps in to do what the ineffectual United Nations cannot, enacting retribution against a Russian man to signify that all Russians will face consequences for their country’s actions. It also showcases the ingenuity of the Ukrainian Security Service.

The key difference between Meme 3 and the other memes lies in its use of a real-life event—the death of a young man who, despite having no direct involvement in Russian aggression in Ukraine, is targeted simply for his nationality. This unfortunate individual has been turned into a symbol of the collective enemy of Ukrainians. The meme’s humour does not stem from hatred towards him personally but rather towards his compatriots, who are seen as complicit in Russia’s actions. Despite its humorous intent, the meme cannot escape the real tragedy it references. Unlike Memes 1 and 2, which depict symbolic and improbable executions of the main perpetrator of the war, Meme 3 incorporates a real and tragic death into a fantastical narrative, attempting to frame it as a sign of inevitable retribution.

The sources of humour in Meme 3 include the oxymoron of a ‘humanistic’ shark, a disparaging comparison between the ineffective UN and the virtuous shark, the shark’s appropriation of a Russian slogan that has been conventionally used for shutting down debates and avoiding explanations, and the clever tactics of the Ukrainian Security Service in enlisting animal agents. In the final panel, the Head of the Security Service serves as a moral authority, justifying the shark’s actions. Overall, the meme carries highly ambiguous content that divides viewers, even within Ukraine, between those who appreciate the humour and those who condemn it.

Table 1 summarises the relevant components of all the memes’ messages.

Structural Elements	Meme 1	Meme 2	Meme 3
Semantic Matrices	Shopping and murder.	A thriller plot and an episode in the war (fundraisers’ activities).	1) A shark attack and the death of a Russian tourist. 2) Anthropomorphizing a shark. 3) Recruitment processes by the Security Service of Ukraine. 4) Inefficient work by the UN.
Source of Amusement	Combining seemingly unrelated experiences in an ad for shoppers.	1) Incorporating thriller episodes into wartime chronicles. 2) The creativity of Ukrainian volunteers using	1) An act of justice performed by an anthropomorphized, humanistic shark. 2) Recruitment of animals by the Security Service of Ukraine.

(Contd.)

Structural Elements	Meme 1	Meme 2	Meme 3
		a fabled Italian American hitman for their tasks. 3) Solving puzzles	3) Nature's support for Ukraine. 4) The contrast between the UN's inefficiency and a shark's conscious humanitarian 'assistance'.
Euphemistic Labelling	An altered picture-portrait of a 'celebrity' on the bag after filling this bag with goods and tightening its handles	A new task for a protagonist in a thriller.	There is no attempt to obscure the death but rather to justify it.
Dehumanization	A person is represented by a photo or picture, not as a real individual.	An anonymous, invisible backstage character whose identity needs to be discovered.	A real person's death is depicted without significant dehumanization, though there is a contrast with the humanistic shark.
Anticipated Outcomes	Release of emotional tension and expression of feelings towards the target.	Release of tension and expression of feelings towards the target through the creation of a new blockbuster plot.	The message is intended as an entertaining addition but may be perceived as gloating, as it assesses a tragic past event.
Signs of Collective Support	-	Crowdfunding of the assassination	-
Presence of Moral Authority	-	Fundraiser and popular comedian.	Head of the Ukrainian Security Forces and the UN tasks.

Table 1: Structural elements of the memes.

Positive Responses

The positive comments for Memes 1 and 2 are analysed separately from those relating to Meme 3 due to their different argumentative foundations.

Three major groups of positive comments emerge:

- 1. General Appreciation of Humour:** This group includes expressions of amusement and approval, such as 'Yes!', 'Beautiful!', 'I want it, too!', 'Where can I buy it?', 'Do not miss (the target)!', and 'Be quick (with the target)!'.

These reactions often include positive emojis like smiley faces and thumbs up, indicating a broad appreciation for the humour.

2. **Expressions of Bonding and Collective Endorsement:** These comments reflect a sense of shared enjoyment and solidarity, as seen in statements like ‘I would like to have two/ten of this!’, ‘My friends would love them, too!’, ‘A dream of millions!’, ‘The best gift!’, and ‘That would be the most popular item in the marketplace!’ This group also includes comments about the hypothetical cost people are willing to pay for achieving the depicted scenario, such as ‘The whole world would have contributed to the payment if we could have found someone to do this (the assassination)’, and ‘If someone could do it, millions would have been living in peace and agreement’. Comments praising the creator of the bag, like ‘Ukrainians welcome this author/designer in Ukraine’, ‘We could make a contract for a continuous supply of these goods’, and ‘This design can be copied by anyone! Everybody will get it soon!’ further indicate collective approval.
3. **Characterisation of the Victim of the Joke:** This is the most popular group of comments, where viewers express disdain for the Russian President, consistent with a victim-blaming mindset within the mechanism of moral disengagement. Comments here include ‘The dog will die a dog’s death!’, ‘Murderer!’, and ‘A tyrant!’ Some comments also provide explanatory narratives that reinforce their stance, such as, ‘This dirty creature does not have any respect for Ukrainian people and the Christian world as a whole! He deserves the worst!’ and ‘He is the one who unleashed the war to ‘prevent’ the war. He destroyed the country to ‘enrich’ it. He says that he killed half a million to sanitise the population!’. Commentators frequently **appeal to moral authorities** to further condemn the target, quoting figures like Valeria Novodvorskaia, a late dissident, and referencing President Biden’s labelling of Putin as a ‘murderer’, or alluding to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. These comments suggest that the humour is appreciated for serving a moral purpose—either the elimination or condemnation of a villain responsible for violating international law. Additionally, some comments reflect on the potential to save lives, emphasising the meme’s perceived moral righteousness.

Appreciation of Meme 3

In contrast, the comments about Meme 3 reflect a different perspective, suggesting that Russians are legitimate targets for animal attacks. Some pro-Ukrainian commenters raise ecological concerns: ‘It is retribution for a hundred thousand

dolphins that died from warships and radioactive fuel. Nature remembers everything'. Others share stories of a giant kangaroo in Australia that attacked Russian tourists, or a mountain parrot in New Zealand that blinded Russian tourists, jokingly attributing these actions to NATO biological laboratories purportedly developing animals that are hostile to Russian DNA—a spoof of Russian propaganda claiming NATO and the USA used Ukraine as a testing ground for biological weapons. Some commenters simply adopt the slogan 'Tasty. Period!' to express their satisfaction.

The target of the shark's attack in Meme 3 is not assigned any personal traits; they are depicted merely as a representative of Russians, considered perpetual enemies of Ukrainians. This sentiment is evident in comments like 'We are happy because this Orc [a stigmatising name for Russians, alluding to the brutish, aggressive, ugly, and malevolent race of monsters in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*] won't come to kill us!', 'We, Ukrainians, are people who have a lot of empathy but we don't waste it on Russians as they are not human', and 'Since at least February 2022 Russian soldiers have been brutally killing Ukrainian civilians because they are just animals! Hence Ukrainians hate all Russians disregarding their input in the war'. Some comments argue, 'It is as natural to be happy when a Russian dies as it is to be happy when a maniac has been killed', and 'If every shark kills a Russian, the war will be over!', or 'This shark managed to do more in 20 minutes than the UN during all 15 months of the war'.

For these commenters, the meme's moral purpose is tied to the idea of eliminating all Russians to help Ukrainians win the war. Those who appreciate the humour in Meme 3 dehumanise and stigmatise all Russians, reflecting ethnic stereotyping (A'Beckett, 2019: 277). The victim is not seen as an individual but as a clichéd representation of a Russian, embodying traits like aggressiveness, illogicality, and hatred towards Ukrainians and all that is progressive.

The comments on Meme 3 highlight a shift in how the reasons for the war and potential ways to end it are represented. The victim is blamed and vilified not for his actions but for being part of the ethnic group engaging in unjustified aggression. The responses underscore the social passivity of Russians, who allow an autocrat to perpetuate the war. Thus, the underlying message in these comments could be summarised as: 'Killing most Russians will free Ukrainians and nature from suffering'.

Table 2 presents an overview of the themes raised in the positive comments for Meme 3.

Reactions	<i>Meme 1</i>	<i>Meme 2</i>	<i>Meme 3</i>
General approval	<p>'Where can I buy it?'</p> <p>'Beautiful!'</p> <p>'I want it too!'</p> <p>'Sell these and donate proceeds to Ukraine relief!'</p>	<p>'Be quick!'</p> <p>'Do not miss [the target]!'</p>	<p>'I am going to vote for the shark in the elections!'</p> <p>'We have more allies— kangaroos, doves and parrots!'</p>
Characterisation of the target (blaming victim/ dehumanisation/ stigmatisation)	<p>'The dog will die a dog's death!'</p> <p>'A tyrant!'</p> <p>'This dirty creature does not have any respect for Ukrainian people and the Christian world as a whole! He deserves the worst!'</p>	<p>'This evil threatens all humanity. It [he] is worse than terrorists!'</p> <p>'No man has been filthier and more horrible than this Putler.'</p>	<p>'Since at least February 2022 Russian soldiers have been brutally killing Ukrainian civilians because [Russians] are just animals! Hence Ukrainians hate all Russians disregarding their input in the war,'</p> <p>'It is as natural to be happy when a Russian dies as it is to be happy when a maniac has been killed'</p>
Moral purposes/ advantageous comparisons	<p>'Millions of people could begin to live in peace and harmony after this!'</p> <p>'If we don't stop him, he will start WW3!'</p>	<p>'Oh God, when will the world understand and free itself from this monster and serial killer? Can we catch and kill him like Bin Laden? He is sick and has access to weapons of mass destruction. We could have millions of victims!'</p>	<p>'This Orc won't come to kill us!'</p> <p>'If every shark kills a Russian, the war will be over!'</p> <p>'It is retribution for a hundred thousand dolphins that died from warships and radioactive fuel. Nature remembers everything.'</p> <p>'The shark in 20 minutes did what the UN could not do during 17 months of the war!'</p>
Acknowledgement of collective support	<p>'That would be the most popular item in the marketplace!'</p> <p>'I would like to buy a dozen of bags like this!'</p>	<p>'A dream of millions!', 'The whole world would have contributed to the payment if we could have found someone to do this [the assassination]'</p>	<p>'We, Ukrainians, are people who have a lot of empathy but we don't waste it on Russians as they are not human'</p> <p>'We are happy when another Orc has been killed!'</p>

(Contd.)

Reactions	Meme 1	Meme 2	Meme 3
References to a moral authority	<p>'Biden also called him a murderer!'</p> <p>'Novodvorskaia called him a Chekist skin, political mediocrity and Stalinist, vengeful and cruel. There is not a single good thing that Putin has done – only deliberate crimes.'</p>	<p>'The court in the Hague has been waiting for him but this is better!'</p>	<p>'Was this shark Vasyl Malyuk?'</p> <p>An image of Kyrylo Budanov, the Head of the Main Directorate of Intelligence greeting the shark.</p>

Table 2: Exemplary overview of positive reactions to the memes.

Negative Responses

Most of the negative responses to the jokes analysed in this study can be categorized into two broad groups: (1) political objections and (2) moral objections.

Political Objections: These objections generally stem from a perceived anti-Russian bias in the jokes or reflect the political divisions within Ukraine. Political criticisms were directed towards both the humourists and their audience, with remarks such as, 'Little Khokhols [a derogatory term for Ukrainians], are you all here? I wonder why no one came to celebrate the counteroffensive!' and 'That's all you can do—pretend to execute Putin while losing your battlefields'. Other comments included derogatory references to Ukrainians' EU aspirations and negative generalizations, such as, 'Sooner or later, you Ukrainians will reveal your rotten essence! Keep up the good work, you mother[...]ers', and 'These days, the fascists pretend to be humorous.' These objections reveal an underlying ethnic bias and a belief that Ukrainians are responsible for their own misfortunes.

Moral Objections: Moral criticisms focus on the perceived inappropriateness and decency of the jokes. Critics argue that the jokes violate moral norms and are an incitement to violence. Comments included, 'You are moral freaks!' and 'This is an overt incitement to violence and a felony in any country in the world'. Some respondents expressed concern about the consequences for humourists, writing 'Shame on you for posting this! With so many subscribers, don't lose your human face,' and questioning why the humourists had not been banned: 'Why aren't you banned for this post?' Additionally, criticisms were made about losing humanistic values and becoming like the aggressors with statements such as, 'Whoever fights with monsters must be

careful not to become a monster themselves.’ These objections were directed at both jokes about Putin and the shark attack, reflecting broader concerns about corrupting the audience and losing moral integrity.

Differences in Objections: The distinction between political and moral objections becomes more apparent when examining the specific targets of the jokes. Some commentators rejected jokes targeting the Russian President though offered similar jokes about other political figures such as Biden, Zelensky, Stoltenberg, or Macron, underscoring a particular respect for Putin.

Conversely, objections to the shark attack meme were driven by humanitarian concerns and the dehumanization of Ukrainians who were perceived to be gloating over the misfortune of an innocent individual. Critics, including Ukrainian bloggers and public figures (Druzenko, 2023; Logunov & Nekrecha, 2023), expressed empathy for the victim, emphasizing, ‘The illustrator from Arkhangelsk is not Shoigu or Putin. Ukrainians should treat others as they wish to be treated’, and lamenting, ‘What a horror! This death must have been painful and scary!’. They argued that the victim, being an emigrant and not directly involved in the conflict, did not deserve the postmortal humiliation.

Summary of Reactions: The negative responses reflect diverse concerns about the use of black humour. One group criticized the jokes on the grounds of ethnic prejudice, viewing Ukrainians as inherently uncivilized. Another group was concerned that the war had desensitized people and made them more sadistic. Additionally, there were varied opinions on the appropriateness of targeting different individuals, with some accepting cruel jokes about tyrants and criminals but rejecting similar jokes about uninvolved individuals. Personal attitudes towards the targets and perspectives on the conflict significantly influenced the acceptance or rejection of the jokes.

A detailed summary of the negative responses can be found in **Table 3**.

Reactions	<i>Meme 1</i>	<i>Meme 2</i>	<i>Meme 3</i>
Disapproval of the humourist and the audience on political/national grounds	‘That’s all you can do – pretend that you execute Putin while you lose your battlefields.’ ‘These days the fascists pretend to be humorous.’	‘And you, beasts, ask, ‘Why us [are under attack]?’ ‘Here is the essence of Banderites! [Ukrainians]. Kill, terrorize... In this way, 80 years ago they burned Polish villages and killed Jews.’	‘The f[...]ing Europeans [an allusion to the Ukrainian aspiration to join the EU]!’ ‘Sooner or later, but you, Ukrainians, would have revealed your rotten essence! Keep up the good work you, mother[...]ers, are doing. Let everyone know what

(Contd.)

Reactions	Meme 1	Meme 2	Meme 3
		'In Europe, they see your [Ukrainian] posts, read them, and make conclusions, so they don't give you anything and kick you out of everywhere.'	your guts are like! 'Little Khokhols [derogative for Ukrainians], are you all here? And I wonder why no one came to celebrate the counteroffensive!'
Disapproval of the humourist and the audience on moral grounds	'Are you happy to walk with this bag?' 'Why aren't you banned for this post?' 'I hate Putin but these cheap populist tricks are disgusting. You can't do anything to him, you can only shit on the sly, like worms.'	'This is an overt incitement to violence and a felony in any country in the world.' 'Supporting terrorism has become routine?'	'Shame on you for posting this! You have many subscribers, so don't lose your human face!' 'Moral freaks!' 'Whoever fights with monsters must be careful that they do not become monsters themselves.' 'Can the shark defend us [Ukrainians] in battlefields?'
Disapproval of the target	'Putin is the best leader in the world!' 'Fools! Putin is the most intelligent politician who raised Russia from her knees!'	'Do you approve of the assassination of politicians?'	'The guy is an emigrant, not guilty of anything. If [the shark] mauled Putin, it would be acceptable to post something like that, but not in this case.' 'What a horror! This death must have been painful and scary!' 'A guy, 23, did not fight in Ukraine and died in Egypt in front of his father. Reaction: hooray, let's have fun and joke, he was Russian!'
Political objections to the message	'Where are your Biden, Ursula Von der Leyen or George Soros? They are the main reason Ukrainians and mercenaries are dying in Ukraine!'	'Prytula collected money to enrich himself!' 'Leon should rather visit China!'	'Can the killer shark help us with the supply of weapons from allies?'

Table 3: Exemplary overview of negative reactions.

Discussion

The analysis of Ukrainian war meme messages directed at Russians, and the online viewer responses to them, has provided valuable insights into the reception, appropriateness, and impact of black humour in contemporary society around the issue of civilised communication and its rules.

Triggers for moral disengagement in meme messages

This investigation revealed that the activation of moral disengagement mechanisms correlates with the positive reception of humour in these memes. The memes employ various triggers to facilitate this disengagement, but the suppression of empathy and remorse is effective only when these triggers align with the viewers' perspectives.

One significant trigger is the euphemistic portrayal of aggressive actions. For instance, depictions of 'execution' or 'assassination' are framed in a way that shifts viewers' focus from the hostile intent to amusement. The outcome of such cruel insinuations is perceived not as incitement to violence but as a platform for emotional relief on the part of the war victims (cf. Kuipers, 2005: 78–79).

It is hard—if not impossible—to translate the memes into texts which could preserve all ambiguities and humorous insinuations of their multimodal sources. A replacement of the innocuous packaging of death wishes with direct statements destroys the memes' playfulness and subtlety. Therefore, it is arguable whether we can test the role of euphemistic presentation in the appreciation of humour by comparing reactions to the original meme, and its variant, containing crude and direct analogues of subtle hints.

Even though many people worldwide view Putin's death as a panacea (cf. Laineste and Fiadotava, 2023; Majdzinska-Koszorowicz & Ostanina-Olszewska, 2023) they still prefer to express their beliefs using euphemisms. For instance, a Soviet and Latvian actor Ivars Kalniņš euphemistically labels his hostile wishes to Putin: 'It would be better [for NATO] to hit the bunker...' (Moseichuk, 2023) 'The bunker' is an indirect reference to Putin, who was allegedly hiding in a bunker when the war started. Many participants in the discussions also convey their thoughts euphemistically avoiding a direct homicide reference: 'Remove the man—remove the problem' which sounds innocuously in Russian 'No person—no problem' and alludes to the depiction of the Stalinist era in the novel *Children of the Arbat* (1987) by Anatoly Rybakov. The euphemistic labelling is an attempt to conceal the transgression of social norms in different communication settings, but memes also use them for entertainment purposes. Occasionally some netizens express their wishes in harsh terms, such as 'May he drop dead' to emphasise their disdain for the completely dehumanised

individual. However, these comments are subject to Facebook censoring and do not have the infectiousness of humorous memes or the subtlety of euphemistic labelling.

Visual elements in the memes often replace traditional verbal sanitization. The juxtaposition of incongruous elements—such as a shopping bag alongside assassination tools or a blockbuster plot with a well-known Ukrainian fundraiser—renders the portrayal of violence improbable and thus entertaining. Unlike September 11 digital jokes, the Ukrainian memes under study refrain from showing their enemies being gutted, raped or beheaded (Kuipers, 2005: 77).

Nevertheless, the use of death imagery remains contentious. Even within a fantastical context, such depictions can evoke real personal tragedies. Only when viewers manage to separate the meme's content from the individual's personal suffering can they interpret the imagery as symbolic retribution against a collective enemy. In how they consume black humour memes, these viewers also tend to believe that the meme's moral purpose outweighs typical ethical considerations and empathetic responses.

Dehumanization is another method employed to shift focus away from hostile intentions to entertainment. For instance, Meme 1 depicts the target as an image on a shopping bag, while Meme 2 involves a fictional character in a blockbuster film. Meme 3 attributes a death to the involvement of an anthropomorphized shark. If viewers dehumanize all Russians, as indicated by comments such as 'Russians have earned the reputation of an "inhuman nation"', they are less likely to object to Meme 3. Conversely, those sensitive to the personal tragedy referenced in the photo may perceive the meme as an affront, suggesting that 'Ukrainians are becoming 'a pack of animals' who harm strangers simply for not belonging to their group' (Druzenko, 2023).

Memes 2 and 3 also feature elements that can mitigate personal responsibility for unethical intentions. The portrayal of recognizable public figures might be interpreted as endorsement by moral authorities in Ukraine, even though this endorsement may not be acknowledged by pro-Russian segments of social media. Additionally, references to public support for fundraising efforts dilute personal responsibility. Many netizens contribute to the discourse with their own interpretations, while others dismiss the memes and ignore the moral disengagement triggers.

Engagement with meme content

The collective endorsement of unethical jokes is amplified through social media interactions, such as emojis, upvotes, shares, and encouraging comments. These interactions suggest that the sentiments expressed in the memes resonate with a wide

audience and reflect shared beliefs. Participants in discussions often reference moral authorities who endorse retribution, thus sharing responsibility for the unethical messages.

The notion of retribution, which shapes the moral purpose of the jokes, is justified through the stigmatization or dehumanization of the target, effectively ‘blaming the victim’ (Bandura) for the harm inflicted by Russians in Ukraine. The moral purpose of these jokes often involves a palliative comparison, wherein the death of a criminal who is a suspect recognised by the International Criminal Court is seen as a potential solution to global issues.

Attitudes towards the target of the humour are crucial in determining the humour’s reception. If the target is blamed for severe crimes against humanity, the cruel jokes are often seen as justified and appropriate. In contrast, if the target is viewed as a revered figure, such as ‘the best leader in the world’ or ‘the man who raised Russia from her knees,’ or even if perceived as an innocent individual, then the humour is considered unacceptable. In these cases, the memes are perceived as threatening and undermining core values and identities (Ritchie, 2009: 288). Differences in the assessment of the target contribute to varying reactions among audiences. Humour is likely to be seen as therapeutic and liberating by those who view the target as deserving of justice, whereas it is experienced as alienating or offensive by those who hold differing views on the conflict and target identity.

Reactions to the memes also indicate that viewers often have divergent perceptions of the jokes’ moral purposes, yet still appreciate the humour. For example, before the full-scale invasion, Russian viewers of Meme 1 blamed Putin for Russia’s dire state, while Ukrainians saw the meme as a metaphor for Russia’s post-Crimea sanctions or later as a critique of Putin’s actions in Donetsk and Luhansk. After February 2022, the focus shifted to Putin’s alleged role in massacres and uncooperative behaviour. This variance in interpretation highlights how viewers’ expectations and knowledge influence their reception of the memes, allowing for the image macros of Memes 1 and 2 to target different figures such as Lukashenko, Biden, Orban, or Zelensky.

Power dynamics and the liberating power of hostile humour

For recipients who support the humorous message, memes 1 and 2 and possibly similar ones created in their likeness offer a rare chance to target individuals or entities perceived as holding superior or intimidating power. Jokes about the death of a perpetrator are seen as a form of revenge for the victims of war. Chan et al. (2016: 2) suggest that the attributes of targets in hostile jokes significantly influence the

intensity of humorous reactions. The audience may appreciate that these jokes deliver a form of judgment that has yet to be rendered by formal judicial systems, represented as ‘The Hague’ or ‘The UN’ in viewers’ comments.

War-themed memes provide their consumers with an escape from harsh realities, offering a fantastical world where dreams are fulfilled. They present puzzles and cryptic messages that engage viewers. Beyond amusement, these memes foster social identity and value assertion (Coulson, 2022: 280) and allow community members to participate in public debates about important social issues (Majdzinska-Koszarowicz & Ostanina-Olszewska, 2023: 132; Coulson, 2022: 280; Godioli, 2020: 15–16; Dynel & Poppi, 2021: 2335–36).

Hostile humour targeting individuals with significant power or immunity is often deemed justifiable. However, attacks on weaker, equally positioned, or virtuous targets are likely to face disapproval. Combining genuine tragedy with fantastical humour can backfire, hindering the appreciation of the humour.

Appreciation of memes and discourse structure of public debates

This study attempted to sift through reactions to the memes by adapting Bandura’s model of moral disengagement. The discourse structure uncovered is not a direct emulation of the model. The clusters of reactions have been compiled differently than the foci of self-regulatory processes.

Three big clusters relevant to the assessment of the memes’ appreciation emerged in discussions. The order of clusters at the final stage of the analysis mirrors the volume of comments in each cluster and their prominence among the others. The first cluster delves into characterisation of the target and approval of its choice and presentation. This cluster unifies moral judgments about the target, palliative comparison with the target’s conduct, and personal views of commentators on dehumanisation/demonisation of the target.

The next cluster relates to the approval/disapproval of the mode of presentation. When viewers endorse the design of the bag, a choice of the hitman, or express care about the shark’s health, they signal that accepted rules of the genre and act according to communicative expectations. The viewers may extend the jokes and offer their own targets or analogical memes. The discussants minimize consequences of aggressive intentions since they just laugh about them but do not compile plans for assassination of Putin or training sharks to kill Russians. They communicate the endorsement of packaging of aggressive wishes. Some viewers may agree that the target deserves the hostile attitudes but disagree with their mode of presentation: ‘I hate Putin but these

cheap populist tricks are disgusting'. Some others like the mode of presentation but disagree with the choice of target, e.g., 'The guy is an emigrant, not guilty of anything. If [the shark] mauled Putin, it would be acceptable to post something like that but not in this case'.

The viewers may elaborate on the public support for the aggression or refer to a moral authority. They can accept/dismiss the authority mentioned in the memes' message or endorse/mock the crowdfunding. For instance, criticism of Prytula's fundraising activities has affected the appreciation of jokes. Comments about collective responsibility for the aggressive intention reveal either an enhancement in appreciation of memes or provide additional reasons for humour rejection.

The three discursive blocks (Characterisation of the Target; Attitudes toward the Presentation of the Content; and Engagement with the Community of Shared Values) remotely resemble the loci of self-regulation processes which include: (1) Locus of Reprehensible Conduct attracting mechanisms of moral judgement, palliative comparison and euphemistic labelling; (2) Locus of Consequences which attracts minimisation of the harmful effects; (3) Locus of Victim coalescing mechanisms of victim blaming and dehumanisation; and (4) Locus of Agency which organizes mechanisms of displacement or diffusion of responsibility (Bandura et al., 1996: 365).

The discursive clusters reflect on the components of the memes but also unfold the associations and interpretations of the viewers. Some comments carry just an endorsement of memes' structural elements in their positive statements and visual reactions. Other comments show personal interpretations of the jokes and suggest creative elaborations of the given ideas.

Potential downsides

The circulation of black humour has notable downsides, including the potential for division. While jokes may be rejected by opposing factions in a conflict, the discord within the same side is more concerning. Prolonged exposure to aggressive humour might lead to desensitisation and trivialisation of events (Majdzinska-Koszorowicz & Ostanina-Olszewska, 2023: 133) that, in the light of the analysed reactions, can be extended to a lowering of moral standards within the discourse community, potentially resulting in the victimisation of individuals unrelated to the conflict.

The sense of liberation provided by these memes can foster a collective belief in the absolute exemption from moral responsibility, leading to an inflated sense of righteousness among community members. In such cases, aggressive humour may blur into disparaging or ethnic humour, involving humiliation and insult towards specific ethnic groups (Chan et al., 2016; Ritchie, 2009; Ferguson & Ford, 2008).

In the light of these findings, the consideration of imposing community standards does not look like an excessive limitation of freedom. Humourists are free to use euphemistic labelling or innocuous visuals for their aggressive reactions. However, the incorporation of disconcerting images of real events into jokes could be problematic. This paper may offer some ideas regarding aspects that require attention in the formulation of community standards which so far have provided conflicting guidelines and have led to inconsistent practices by those who monitor the public communication space. Ultimately, war itself is a primary driver of changes in public perception and morals, with its instigators responsible for the cognitive distortions and detrimental social practices experienced in the traumatized society. Further quantitative research, focus group studies, and interviews are needed to validate these findings on a larger scale and assess the significance and influence of each factor in shaping the appreciation and inhibition of black humour in various social contexts such as warfare and human rights violations/assertions.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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