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## **#VLADDYDADDY ON TIKTOK: IMAGINED INTIMACY AND MEMETIC PARTICIPATION IN TIMES OF WAR**

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### **Introduction**

#Vladdydaddy is a popular internet meme that emerged during the 2016 elections in the United States on 4chan and Twitter to characterize the perceived submissive behavior of Donald Trump towards Vladimir Putin. The meme re-emerged on TikTok in the days leading to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, gaining a new meaning. In 2022, the #Vladdydaddy meme displayed TikTokers' creativity with humorous videos imagining a fictional connection between them and the Russian President. In these memes, TikTokers were immersing themselves in imagined spaces facilitating communication lines with Putin, attempting to persuade him to refrain from invading Ukraine. Our analysis of this meme is part of our research project focused on studying social media memetic responses to human tragedies like the Russia-Ukraine war. In this paper, we focus on "DM memes" as a creative sub-meme of #Vladdydaddy. The memes' rapid virality is due to their use of irony and humor to advocate for social justice, aligning with TikTok's playful content style (Abidin, 2020).

### **Memetic Participation and Imagined Intimacy**

TikTok is one of the most popular platforms among young users, promoting collective engagement around memetic processes (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). The potential of the platform to generate memetic participation (Milner, 2016) and imagined intimacy (Greenwood & Long, 2011) shapes our theoretical framework. In our analysis, we draw on Milner's (2016) five fundamental logics of memetic participation - multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread. Additionally, we draw on Greenwood and Long's

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(2011) conceptualization of imagined intimacy, which suggests that it emerges among individuals with unmet emotional needs towards a celebrity or public figure. Using these frameworks, we examine how imagined intimacy with Putin is achieved through the reappropriation of a widely recognized meme used to express desires for peace. Prior research on DMing memes examined Hillary Clinton's 2012 'texts from Hillary' on Twitter, crafting a relatable and dominant image for her in text exchanges with male political rivals and media celebrities (Anderson & Sheeler, 2014). In our corpus, Putin is portrayed as responsive, reinforcing the constructed image of the Russian leader and aiding TikTok communities in comprehending the distressing aspects of war and violence.

## **Method**

To facilitate a collection of the relevant videos, we manually collected 800 videos through a combination of personal and purposefully created research TikTok profiles. We created a clean slate user to train TikTok's algorithm for relevant content, using the browser version of the app and collecting specific video URLs manually, along with an experimental browser extension, 'ZeeSchuimer,' for bulk video scraping. We gathered #Vladdydaddy meme re-emergence on TikTok's 'for you' page from the days before the Ukraine invasion in February 2022 to July 2022. We recognize a potential limitation in our method related to the app's emphasis on "freshness" (Sánchez-Querubín et al., 2023), prioritizing more recent videos over popular ones. To address this, we manually accessed video lists under the hashtag and associated sounds, searching for specific posting dates.

We retrieved videos from the hashtag page, manually coding them into sub-categories, with a focus on timestamps to understand the broader TikTok community's temporal response. We grouped the different versions of #Vladdydaddy, finding 254 'DM meme' videos in our collection, and analyzed the content using multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Bezemer, 2023). Grounded in social semiotics, this analytical approach is well-suited for scrutinizing digital interactions among TikTok content creators and the symbolism and meanings within the #Vladdydaddy meme and its community. As such, the visual, textual, and sonic cues present in our collected videos, as well as the connections of the meme to other memes and real-life events, will be considered and emphasized in the analysis.

## **Key Findings**

DMing Putin is part of a long-standing tradition within the realm of Internet memes. This particular type of meme is often characterized by a humorous tone and employs the format of text messaging or direct messaging to simulate conversations with famous personalities, caricatures of family members, love interests, or close friends. This typology of #Vladdydaddy memes portrays an intimate exchange with Putin by simulating direct message conversations with the ambitious aim of persuading him to withdraw his threats to invade Ukraine. The videos in this category often start with attempts to mock Putin's masculinity and physical features, targeting his hairline or attractiveness, as exemplified in Figure 1. In certain respects, Putin's extensively documented political image, rooted in masculinity and symbolizing his power, is leveraged humorously to envision a scenario where he might be persuaded to avoid war by presenting alternative solutions.

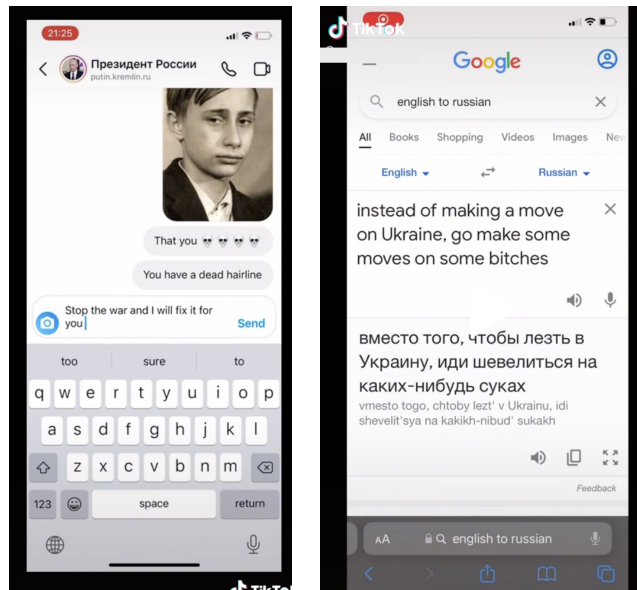


Figure 1. DM memes provide alternatives or exchanges to stop the war

Other variations demonstrate an elevation in the users' creativity, as Putin's imagined response ranges from a mere notification of the message being "seen" to a photo of the user's residence or a full-blown threat to bomb the user's house. In the response-from-Putin videos, the user then begins to backtrack either by deleting the messages or stating that it was just a joke. These retractions are often accompanied by audio effects such as accelerated breathing, frantic typing, or panic-inducing sounds, which create a sense of stress and fear. Alternatively, some videos incorporate popular music, such as the track "White Khaby Lame" which is a sped-up version of the song "Dive in" by Jeleel or Gwen Stefani's "Hollaback Girl", following Milner's (2016) memetic participation logics of *reappropriation* of sounds, *collectivism* in expressing the desire to avoid war and visual imitation in following a well-known DM meme genre.



Figure 2. DM meme praising Zelenski

Another variation in this genre of memes involves sending direct messages to other world leaders and seeking their aid in the ongoing conflict. For instance, one popular meme addresses Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski's "too many bitches" - implying he is an object of courtship by members of the opposite sex. This variation exemplifies how memes can intersect and draw on pre-existing collective narratives like those that disparage Putin's attractiveness among women. This variant seems to reflect the general support for Zelenski and an attempt to express the need for world leaders to intervene using language and format that fits the lighter, playful tone of TikTok. A noteworthy observation is the use of derogatory language in these memes, which serves to diminish the role of women in both the political sphere and the context of this conflict.

## Conclusions

One could argue that DMing Putin is a collective coping mechanism to fulfill an emotional need through the construction of imagined intimacy between users participating in the spread of the #VladdyDaddy meme with their constructed version of Vladimir Putin (Greenwood & Long, 2011). The sense of helplessness experienced by digital creators confronted with the looming threat of war has prompted a collective response, as they utilize a familiar format to express their aspirations for peace through an engaging and conversational medium (Abidin, 2020). While it is clear that DMing Putin is not a real solution to the ongoing conflict, memetic communities collectively assert their stance against Putin's actions. It is worth noting that due to the authoritarian nature of the Russian regime, activist actions that target Putin on a personal level would never be possible within Russian borders. In 2019, laws were passed in Russia that prohibited any form of 'disrespect towards authorities' (BBC, 2019), which were then followed by TikTok ceasing operations in the country and strict censorship laws being implemented after the invasion (Reuters, 2022). This underscores the significance of exploring seemingly trivial online discursive practices that may carry grave consequences offline. In doing so, we bring to the forefront the global community of creators who take a firm stance towards the current political climate in Russia.

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