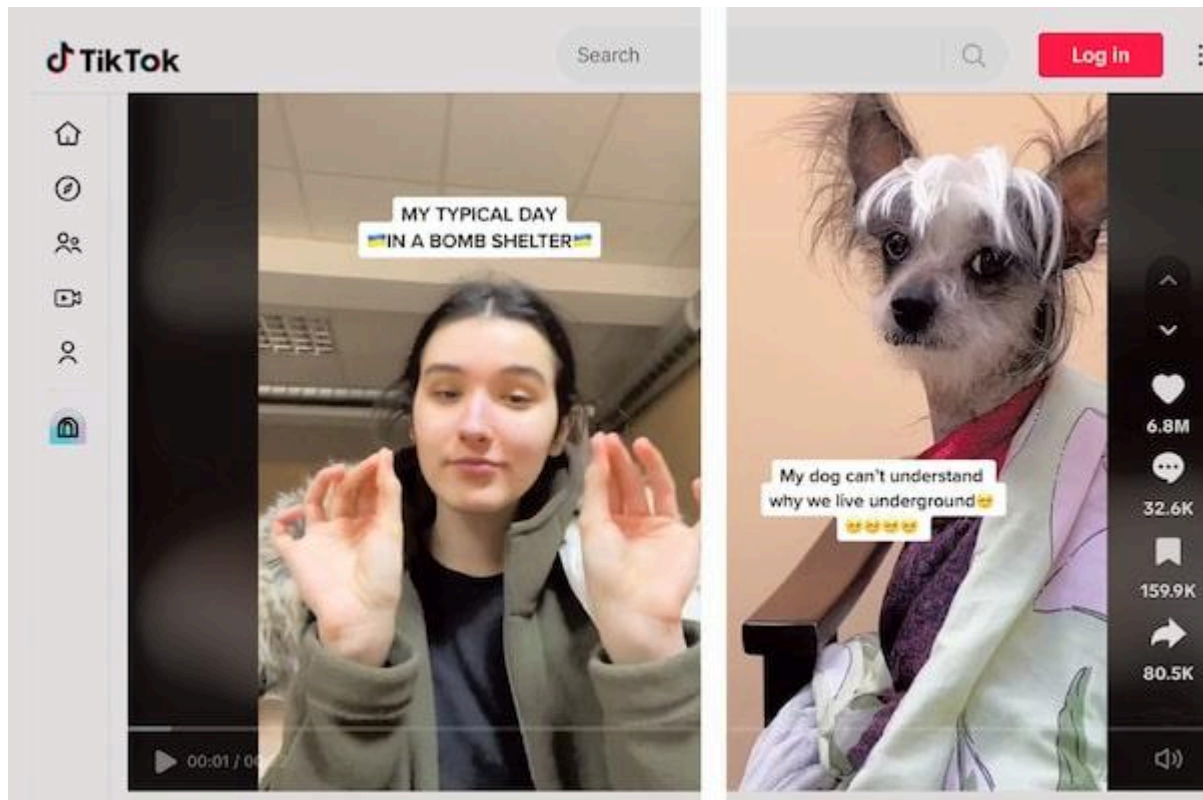


OPINION

The ‘playful trauma’ bringing war to your social feeds

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CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED DECEMBER 13, 2024



In the aftermath of Russia’s invasion in the early months of 2022, Valeria Shashenok, a 23-year-old Ukrainian woman, began posting videos to TikTok of her family’s daily life under siege. This video from a shelter is accompanied by crooner Louis Prima’s rollicking version of Che La Luna Mezzo Mare, which she rhythmically snaps along to.

VALERISSSH/TIK TOK

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In recent years, the world has collectively witnessed profound levels of violence, mass displacement, and the relentless bombardment of civilian and vital infrastructure in conflict zones across the globe. The world's attention has been gripped by continuing devastation in places like Ukraine, Gaza, and Lebanon, transmitted to us by media outlets that have tirelessly covered these stories. But there are new modes of information-sharing that have set these conflicts apart from previous ones, and given new depth to the personal, on-the-ground experiences of individuals who are living through these wars.

Young people, often caught in the crossfire of conflicts, have turned to social media – a platform they already associate with everyday life – to share their personal experiences of war in innovative and effective ways. In turn, we believe they are reshaping how war is viewed by the general public, particularly members of their own generation. It is now more possible than ever to witness the violence of war in real-time through the eyes of the civilians living through it, intensifying the emotional urgency and devastating impacts of these conflicts.

Conflict-related content has become increasingly personalized, imitative and shareable, particularly since many of today's youth have grown up not knowing a world without social media. TikTok has notably become a significant space for sharing such content within the digital landscape, amplifying the immediacy of war and humanizing its impacts. As academics studying digital culture, our current research highlights how social media, and TikTok in particular, has been used by young people to share their experiences of war in real-time, intertwining personal trauma with the platform's engaging style. TikTok's vast reach has empowered these users to bring their trauma into the global spotlight, while also building international awareness of their plights. And this awareness has mattered greatly; with TikTok's largely young user base, social media posts documenting the ongoing violence in the Gaza Strip, for example, were likely a catalyst for the large number of student protests and encampments that sprung up on university campuses in the Western world this year.

A key focus of our research has been the ways in which TikTok's unique structure enables users to merge trauma with humour, creating what we term "playful trauma." Here, TikTok's templates transform distressing experiences into content that is both poignant and, often, unexpectedly amusing.

Take, for example, the videos uploaded to TikTok by [Valeria Shashenok](#), a 23-year-old Ukrainian woman from Chernihiv (a city near Ukraine's borders with both Belarus and Russia). In the aftermath of Russia's invasion in the early months of 2022, she began posting videos of her family's daily life under siege, from living in a bomb shelter, to looking for food and supplies, to mourning the death of a family member. Her content is devastating, but the tone of some of it is something else entirely; in one video, [footage of bombed buildings](#) and clips of her daily life in a shelter are accompanied by the rollicking 1972 version of C'è la luna mezzo mare by jazz crooner Louis Prima, which she rhythmically snaps along to.

One can understand that the creator is living in terrifying circumstances, but the result is also bizarrely funny, demonstrating a striking resistance to Vladimir Putin's military efforts (and garnering 6.8 million likes on TikTok).

Russians themselves also took to TikTok to resist government actions in the wake of the Ukraine invasion. In April, 2022, a TikTok account called [@ironcurtainlyf](#) uploaded footage of their "point-of-view" or "POV," from St. Petersburg (or St. Policeburg, as they call it), using the [Sex and the City theme song](#) to accompany several clips of Russian police surveilling residents en masse, and ostensibly arresting people found to be protesting the Ukraine invasion.

This type of content may seem offensive, or shocking to some. But this approach reflects a longstanding tradition on social media platforms of using humour as a coping mechanism, recasting the harsh realities of adversity into accessible, and sometimes ironically playful, narratives that foster resilience and community.

These practices are also evident in other conflict zones, with creators in Gaza and Lebanon employing similar methods to share their "POVs" amid the current Israeli offensives.

In Gaza, TikTok users have shown what their daily lives are like under constant threat in refugee camps, drawing viewers in to the intimate realities of their experience.

[Mohamad Imad Khalidi](#) (username @mohammad_kh_1) is a young man in Gaza who frequently uploads short vlogs of his day-to-day life; he [cleans the floors of his family's tent](#), cooks simple dishes with the ingredients he manages to scrape together, and in recent months he has even managed to plant a garden.

Mohamad's videos, and others like them, feel intensely personal, allowing viewers from around the world to intimately sense what life is like amid conflict. We can see that routines in Gaza are often interrupted by the sounds of air strikes or scrambling to find safety during shelling, capturing the resilience of the people living there, but also the precariousness of their existence.

For the 330,000 followers of 19-year-old Gaza resident [Medo Halimy](#), who had posted videos to TikTok of his [experiences as a refugee](#), that precariousness became all too real when it was reported in late August that he had [died in an Israeli air strike](#).

In Lebanon, creators often use dark humour to draw attention to what it means to live under the constant threat of bombardment. In the midst of Israeli strikes in late November, Lebanese TikTok creator [@timakh9](#) shared what would otherwise be a mundane, short clip showcasing a pineapple [juice box](#), only they were doing so against the backdrop of shattered buildings, playing on the absurdity of finding “normal” moments in the midst of dire conditions.

Delving into “playful trauma” is essential for comprehending how social media can shape public perception, offering insight into the lived realities of creators in conflict zones.

For creators in Gaza, posting to social media is a vital act of resilience in a media landscape where their voices are often marginalized, and portrayals, particularly from Israeli outlets, tend toward dehumanization. By sharing glimpses of their everyday lives, these creators defy an overwhelming narrative of despair, reminding the world that the civilians in this territory have not consigned themselves to death, but are instead fuelled by a commitment to life.

This phenomenon disrupts typical victim narratives, rendering creators not as passive victims, but as active agents who have harnessed social media platforms to share, adapt and resist.

By making their experiences accessible and relatable, TikTok creators mobilize a form of digital empathy that challenges distant audiences to engage with their realities. Our research suggests that when [incorporating memes](#) as frameworks for trauma communication during wars, these videos are more highly engaged with by online audiences.

This shows that social media use during wartime can shift global perceptions, contribute to more informed public discourse, and even influence how we respond to trauma on both personal and collective levels, locally and globally.

While TikTok provides content creators with a space to [process and express their trauma](#) through performative acts, “playful trauma” also carries the risk of trivializing or aestheticizing the severe realities of wars.

The pressure to make trauma visible for engagement may lead creators to emphasize dramatic moments, potentially sidelining the deeper psychological impacts of their experiences (which are less algorithmically affirmative). This focus on the performative risks fostering superficial understandings of the actual trauma being shared.

So, the next time you encounter playful trauma on your social media feeds, take a moment to reflect on the underlying message. What are these creators truly trying to communicate through humour in the face of adversity? Why might they choose to depict life under siege with irony or laughter?

As MIT philosophy professor Kieran Setiya [has written](#), “Comedic pedagogy sugars the pill of painful truths ... what comics convey is not just information but the practice of political critique. They make it fun to look beneath the surface of society and inspire us to follow them in doing so.”

And follow them we must. Is seeking shelter from bombs, or enduring life in tents really something to simply joke about – or is the use of humour in these circumstances a testament to resilience in the midst of despair? From a research perspective, we argue it is the latter. For those living in despair, humour might be the only lifeline that reconnects them to their humanity, as a powerful way to reclaim a sense of vitality and agency amid unimaginable circumstances.

But our increasingly intimate view of the victims of conflict risks becoming a spectacle, drawing us into a reality that feels almost scripted, like a TV series. We

must resist the instinct to view this content with passive amusement; instead, we implore everyone to bear witness to this suffering with intentional presence, and consider the very real consequences of what we're seeing online.