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Digital Fem-Washing of War: Olena Zelenska's *Vogue* Cover and the #sitlikeagirl Campaign

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Abstract

This article examines the media controversy surrounding Olena Zelenska's 2022 *Vogue* photoshoot, including audience reactions, subsequent news coverage, and the feminist social media campaign #sitlikeagirl. It investigates how feminist discourse became mobilised within highly mediatised wartime communication. Drawing on conjunctural cross-platform analysis of social media posts, Instagram comments, and news coverage, the study reveals a significant discrepancy between dominant journalistic framings of the controversy and the discourse visible within the original comment sections. While media coverage repeatedly framed Zelenska as targeted by misogynistic criticism concerning her allegedly "unfeminine" posture, the analysed comments predominantly criticised the political and aesthetic implications of glamourising war through fashion media. The article argues that the viral feminist framing of the campaign emerged less as a direct response to observable sexism and more as a participatory and affective form of wartime digital communication shaped by platform logics, emotional alignment, and recognisable postfeminist activist aesthetics. Situating the campaign within broader debates on participatory war, misinformation, digital activism, and nation branding, the article proposes the concept of digital fem-washing of war to describe how feminist visibility and activist language become incorporated into the communicative infrastructures of contemporary hypermediated warfare.

Keywords

digital feminism; misinformation; nation branding; participatory war; postfeminism; Russian-Ukrainian War; social media activism

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1. Introduction

In July 2022, American *Vogue* published a photoshoot featuring Ukraine's First Lady, Olena Zelenska, photographed by Annie Leibovitz amid the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. The images immediately generated global attention and controversy. While supporters praised the shoot as historic, powerful, and feminist, critics accused it of glamourising war, aestheticising suffering, and transforming political violence into celebrity spectacle. Shortly afterwards, a feminist social media flashmob under the hashtag #sitlikeagirl emerged across Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook in defence of Zelenska. Women began recreating one particular pose from the photoshoot, in which Zelenska sits on stairs leaning forward with slightly open legs, while media coverage widely described the campaign as a feminist response to sexist attacks accusing Zelenska of sitting in an "unfeminine" or "manly" manner.

As First Lady, Zelenska occupied a uniquely symbolic position in which femininity, celebrity politics, wartime embodiment, and geopolitical representation converged. The photoshoot itself was not an isolated media event, but part of a broader wartime visibility strategy surrounding Volodymyr Zelensky's media persona as an actor-turned-politician and digitally skilled wartime communicator (Roman et al., 2022; Ryabinska, 2022; Spector, 2023). Existing scholarship has already examined Zelensky's populist hyperreality (Yanchenko, 2022) and the strategic role of media communication in shaping perceptions of his wartime leadership (Dyczok & Chung, 2022; Panarari & Ventura, 2026). Zelenska's representation similarly operated within broader dynamics of celebrity politics, affective nation branding, and wartime soft power (Corner & Pels, 2003; Rojek, 2001; Wheeler, 2013).

In this article, I examine the #sitlikeagirl controversy as a complex media event comprising three interconnected components: (a) audience reactions to Olena Zelenska's *Vogue* photoshoot visible in the original Instagram comment sections, (b) the framing of these reactions within online news coverage, and (c) the subsequent emergence and circulation of the feminist hashtag campaign #sitlikeagirl across social media platforms. Analysing these elements together makes it possible to trace how meanings were transformed as the controversy travelled across media environments. The analysis is guided by three research questions:

> RQ1: How were audience reactions to the *Vogue* photoshoot articulated in the original Instagram comment sections?
>
> RQ2: How were these reactions reframed through subsequent online news coverage?
>
> RQ3: How did the #sitlikeagirl campaign mobilise feminist discourse within this evolving media event?

In the context of this article, feminist discourse refers to visual and semantic frames articulated through media forms associated with postfeminist culture and digital feminist activism. I argue that the resulting campaign functioned simultaneously as participatory misinformation, postfeminist wartime branding, and a form of affective digital mobilisation within the communicative infrastructures of contemporary war. I demonstrate a significant discrepancy between media framings of the controversy and the discourse visible within the original comment sections under *Vogue*'s posts. While journalistic coverage repeatedly described Zelenska as targeted by misogynistic criticism concerning her posture, the overwhelming majority of

negative comments criticised the political and aesthetic implications of the photoshoot itself, particularly the perceived glamourisation and romanticisation of war. Explicitly sexist remarks were nearly absent.

Consequently, the article argues that the viral feminist framing of the campaign emerged less as a direct response to observable misogyny and more as a form of affective and participatory wartime communication shaped by platform logics, emotional alignment, and recognisable postfeminist activist aesthetics. Participatory war communication increasingly operates through affective impact rather than verification, especially within fragmented and hypermediated digital environments characterised by misinformation, emotional intensity, and political polarisation (Hoskins, 2020; Merrin, 2019; Merrin & Hoskins, 2025). In this context, feminist language and activist visibility become incorporated into broader geopolitical struggles over legitimacy, recognition, and military support. I therefore introduce the concept of digital fem-washing of war to describe how feminist discourse, empowerment aesthetics, and participatory digital activism become mobilised to soften, personalise, and morally legitimise wartime communication.

Rather than evaluating the war itself or its military decision-making, the article examines the contradictions, affective dynamics, and communicative infrastructures produced through the digital mediation of war. At the same time, reducing the campaign to shallow neoliberal feminism or "woke" war propaganda would overlook the specific geopolitical conditions shaping wartime communication from Ukraine itself, particularly within the context of post-Soviet identity formation, nation branding, and struggles over geopolitical visibility.

The article begins by situating the campaign within existing scholarship on digital war, gendered conflict, and post-Soviet feminist politics. It then outlines the conjunctural cross-platform methodology used in the study before presenting findings from the analysis of Instagram comments and media coverage surrounding the campaign. Finally, the article examines how activist language, postfeminist aesthetics, and digitally mediated participation increasingly operate as communicative infrastructures within contemporary hypermediated warfare.

2. Literature Review: The Ukraine War as Discursive Battles on Gender

2.1. Digital War and Participatory Conflict

Various strands of academic literature (Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023; Strelnyk, 2024; Zwarun & Canevez, 2023) have framed the war in Ukraine as one of the most discursive, mediatised, and media-reliant conflicts in contemporary history, with the rich and dynamically evolving discourses surrounding the war continuously uncovering layers of this multifaceted Russo-Ukrainian conflict (Jakupec, 2024). Zwarun and Canevez (2023), for example, showcase a profound contradiction in which, contrary to battlefield losses, Ukraine's victory becomes visible within communication itself, as its global reach and resonance extend far beyond the news cycle.

One of the key engines of this deeply mediatised character of the war in Ukraine is the multidimensional forms of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation campaigns surrounding the conflict (e.g., Erlich & Garner, 2021; Golovchenko et al., 2018; Hinton, 2015; Zecchinon & Standaert, 2025). Within the burgeoning field of disinformation and hybrid warfare, predominant attention has been devoted to Russia's digital propaganda, exercised internally and deployed externally as a tool of geopolitical influence

(Dov Bachmann et al., 2023; Hameleers et al., 2024; Wenzel et al., 2024). It is important to note, however, that disinformation, now widely explored within global political contexts as a key element in the toolbox of contemporary warfare, emerged from Russia's own military strategy. Merrin (2019, p. 190), in the foundational publication *Digital War*, traces how the concept of information war had already been embraced in the 1990s, referring to Russian military analyst Sergei P. Rastorguev, who argued that disinformation functions as a strategic weapon because it can weaken states internally and destabilise societies from within.

Agentic involvement of citizens, not merely as audiences of mediatised transmissions of war but as active participants shaping and circulating ever-changing narratives, including misinformation and disinformation, has become a long-standing operational interest within digital warfare studies (e.g., Berenger, 2006; Ford & Hoskins, 2022; Hoskins et al., 2020; Merrin, 2019; Merrin & Hoskins, 2024). This body of scholarship explores how wide access to multimedia mobile technologies enables the production and dissemination of information while fuelling wartime uses of cyberspace by ordinary individuals (Choi et al., 2006). Merrin (2019, p. 214) paints a hypermediatised, hybrid, multivector, and multi-actor ecology of the global battlefield when he writes:

> Today, every conflict is, to a greater or lesser extent, hypermediated through a range of outlets by governments and the military, by mainstream news producers and by groups, and individuals, using every technological system, platform, service and device available to them.

This hypermediated environment brings together technological infrastructures, political conflict, legal struggles, and everyday cultural participation, creating the conjunctural conditions through which contemporary warfare is experienced and contested. Galeotti (2022), for example, argues that battlefields have increasingly contaminated reality itself through the overwhelming process of the "weaponisation of everything."

Despite the extensive scholarly attention devoted to Russian propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and state-driven information warfare (e.g., Dov Bachmann et al., 2023; Erlich & Garner, 2021; Hameleers et al., 2024; Wenzel et al., 2024), considerably less attention has been paid to the participatory, affective, and often unintentional circulation of misinformation among pro-Ukrainian digital publics themselves. While existing scholarship has explored citizen participation in wartime information environments (Golovchenko et al., 2018), the emotional and platform-driven dynamics through which supportive publics amplify simplified, emotionally compelling, or inaccurate narratives remain comparatively underexamined. This gap becomes particularly visible in cases where digital participation, moral alignment, and activist communication intersect within highly mediatised wartime environments.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the groundwork for this participative, discursively saturated, and hypermediated environment had already been laid before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. For example, while discussing Ukrainian citizens' involvement in digital communications, Golovchenko et al. (2018) argue that although Western scholars often describe pro-Kremlin messaging aimed at Western publics as "information warfare," Russian officials and academics simultaneously present the West as equally engaged in information warfare against Russia, claiming that Western states seek to undermine Russia's political stability, diminish its global influence, and promote anti-Russian sentiment. These split articulations of the conflict have been noted to reanimate Cold War rhetoric structured around oppositions between West and East, civilisation and barbarism, "us" and "them" (e.g., Makhortykh & Bastian, 2022; Ptaszek et al., 2024).

2.2. Gender, War, and Civilisational Conflict

The war in Ukraine has, however, also been conceptualised as a conflict that stands out against the backdrop of historical wars, as the sides involved explicitly mobilise gendered imaginaries, with Russia's war being "explicitly fought for the so-called traditional values" (Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023, p. 350). The discursive conflict, marked by theatrical and myth-making language, presents a simplified bipolar civilisational struggle (Martsenyuk, 2022) between the allegedly decadent and morally declining political West, symbolised through notions such as "Gayropa" or "Gayrope" (Foxall, 2017) and "Gayromaidan" (Riabova & Riabov, 2014), and the supposedly "traditional" values associated with the ideology of the "Russkiy Mir" or "Russian world," alongside the self-orientalising imaginary of the "illiberal East" as part of a broader "Eurasian" civilisation (Shirinian, 2021). As some scholars argue, contemporary Ukrainian national identity itself is shaped through a double articulation: rejection of Russian imperialism and a simultaneous desire to be recognised as a European country (Zherebkina, 2019). At the same time, the idea of a "return to Europe" remains deeply embedded within historically unequal gendered and racialised relations of global capitalism (Lyubchenko, 2022).

Various academic projects, including a significant portion of the meta-narrative surrounding the political and selectively anti-imperial orientations of gender studies, directly address the centrality of feminism, queerness, and womanhoods in war-torn Ukraine as categories shaped by coloniality (e.g., Johnson, 2023; Shevtsova, 2024; Solovey, 2023). For example, Luciani and Shevtsova (2025) apply a framework of securitisation to trace how sexuality becomes employed within projects of militarised nation-building in the context of the war in Ukraine. They posit that securitisation and desecuritisation occur simultaneously during wartime, as some sexual minorities become integrated into national efforts while others continue to be represented as threats to national integrity.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the gendered character of war is not specific to this conflict alone. Rather, it has long constituted a significant area of academic inquiry, particularly within feminist and critical war studies examining how warfare reshapes social relations, identities, and structures of power (Caprioli et al., 2008; Cockburn, 2007, 2012, 2017; Enloe, 2007; Sjoberg, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Across this scholarship, gender is understood not as a secondary effect of conflict but as a symbolic, reproductive, and material engine of war itself, structuring distinctions between victims and warriors while reinforcing and weaponising gender roles. Feminist scholars have further demonstrated the gendered organisation of both the public and private realities of war, where intimate relations, community structures, and population control become deeply entangled with militarism, occupation, capitalism, and state violence. In this context, war crimes themselves often express gendered relations between states through symbolic processes of feminisation and emasculation (Sjoberg, 2014), while Segato (2022) draws connections between intimate femicide and public, war-like femicide, particularly within colonial contexts.

2.3. Postcolonial Ukraine and Gendered Visibility

Ukraine's national identity and postcolonial structuring remain especially dynamic and sensitive, continuously redefined not only through the ongoing war itself but also through the public and academic discourses surrounding it. Ukraine's identity, political choices, and future are frequently conceptualised as trapped politically, culturally, and economically between imperial centres: the Western-centric and Russian

imperial gaze (Mayerchyk & Plakhotnik, 2021). Potapova and O'Sullivan (2024, p. 263), for example, describe resistance to the invasion as resistance against what they call the "double-coloniality" of Ukraine's current position. Yet this seemingly bipolar dynamic remains far from simple, as Solovey (2023) points to Russia's own appropriation of postcolonial language. This, in turn, reveals "coloniality" itself as functioning as a floating signifier within the contemporary matrix of victimhood and the politics of believability.

Importantly, the power of gender in the war in Ukraine extends far beyond discourse. Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan (2023, p. 348) demonstrate how these discourses carry material consequences, arguing that "the Russian invasion of Ukraine does become a contestation of gender order, with gender turning into the central battlefield, both in the figurative and literal sense of the word." Within the widespread involvement of women, feminists, and queer people in Ukraine's war effort (e.g., Luciani & Shevtsova, 2025; Rachok, 2024; Ratilainen et al., 2025a, 2025b; Zhaivoronok, 2026), Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan (2023, p. 356) further argue that Ukraine's resistance to the Russian invasion has generated a distinct emancipatory dynamic marked by profound transformations in both masculinity and femininity. However, they also stress that these wartime social changes remain unstable and contested, as the liberal gender order emerging through resistance continues to be shaped and threatened by the extreme gendered consequences of Russia's genocidal aggression. Building on these observations, the #sitlikeagirl campaign provides a particularly revealing case study through which to examine postfeminist entanglements in the war context. While existing scholarship has extensively explored gendered imaginaries, digital warfare, and feminist participation in the Ukrainian context, limited attention has been paid to how postfeminist aesthetics, empowerment rhetoric, and digitally recognisable activist repertoires become mobilised within participatory war communication, where emotional alignment, visibility, and geopolitical solidarity increasingly operate through platformed cultures of virality.

3. Methodology

In this study, I employed a conjunctural, cross-platform analysis to examine the emergence and circulation of the #sitlikeagirl campaign following Olena Zelenska's 2022 *Vogue* photoshoot. The methodological approach combines digital ethnography (e.g., Ash et al., 2024), cross-platform analysis (Tao & Peng, 2023), and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) in order to trace how feminist discourse was mobilised and circulated within highly mediatised wartime environments. Following Hall et al. (1978), the conjunctural approach situates the campaign within broader dynamics of participatory war, platform capitalism, postfeminist digital culture, and the mediatisation of the Russian-Ukrainian War.

The project emerged from observing the virality of the #sitlikeagirl hashtag across social media platforms and the rapid appearance of news articles discussing the campaign in multiple languages. Within approximately one week following the publication of the *Vogue* photoshoot, fewer than 50 online articles discussing the controversy and activist response were identified. The empirical dataset ultimately consisted of over 5,000 items encompassing social media comments, social media posts, and news and entertainment articles relating to Olena Zelenska, the *Vogue* photoshoot, and the #sitlikeagirl campaign. The empirical material corresponded to the three components of the media event identified above: (a) Instagram comments under the original *Vogue* posts, (b) online news coverage of the controversy, and (c) social media posts participating in the #sitlikeagirl campaign.

I organised the analysis around two interconnected analytical arcs. The first focused on digital ethnography and cross-platform observation of the campaign across Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Particular attention was paid to how users reproduced visual conventions, hashtags, activist language, emotional performances, and solidarity gestures associated with the campaign. Although the flashmob circulated across multiple platforms, Instagram functioned as the primary site of analysis due to its central role in postfeminist activist influencing and visibility-based feminist communication (Curran-Troop et al., 2022; Mahoney, 2020).

The second analytical arc focused on thematic discourse analysis of social media comments and media reporting surrounding the controversy. The primary dataset consisted of 3,219 comments collected from Instagram posts published by American *Vogue* and *Vogue Ukraine* corresponding to the specific image that inspired the flashmob. The comments were multilingual, including English, Ukrainian, Russian, Spanish, and other languages. I conducted the analysis at two time points: one day after publication of the photoshoot and one year later. This enabled assessment of the stability of discursive patterns over time.

Using inductive thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I categorised the comments into three broad domains: (a) political and representational critique, including concerns regarding glamourisation of war, propaganda, celebrity politics, and class; (b) gendered discourse, including explicit misogyny and references to femininity; and (c) affective and participatory responses, including solidarity expressions, emojis, and nationalist sentiment.

Twenty-one predominantly English-language online news articles published between late July and August 2022 were collected through Google using the search term "#sitlikeagirl." The sample comprised transnational news outlets, lifestyle media, photography websites, and public broadcasters reporting on the controversy and the subsequent campaign. The collected articles broadly fell into two categories: (a) reports amplifying and reproducing the #sitlikeagirl campaign and (b) critical commentary discussing Zelenska's representation in *Vogue*. Comparing media representations with primary comment data enabled analysis of discrepancies between reported discourse and the observable discourse surrounding the controversy.

4. Findings

The #sitlikeagirl flashmob originated on Instagram before spreading onto Twitter and Facebook, often in the form of compiled screenshots of women recreating Olena Zelenska's sitting pose. Across platforms, the overwhelming majority of responses expressed positive or affirmative sentiments either verbally or through emojis and symbolic gestures of support.

Negative comments broadly fell into two categories. The first criticised the glamorous, commercialised, or aestheticised character of the *Vogue* photoshoot within the context of the ongoing war. These comments accused *Vogue* and the Zelenskys of romanticising suffering, transforming war into celebrity spectacle, or engaging in propaganda and image management. The second category consisted of openly pro-Russian comments discussing broader geopolitical tensions and Ukrainian-Russian history, often written in Russian. In several cases, these categories overlapped.

The most frequent positive descriptors included “strong” (34 mentions), “amazing” (31 mentions), “proud” (17 mentions), and “bravo” (13 mentions). By contrast, the negative comments most commonly used terms associated with political and ethical critique: “propaganda” (10 mentions), “clown” (10 mentions), “wrong” (8 mentions), “glamourisation” (7 mentions), and “romanticisation” (4 mentions).

Most significantly, accusations concerning Zelenska’s pose as “not ladylike” were almost entirely absent from the analysed comments. Such language did not appear in any substantial or repeated way across the dataset. The closest recurring term was “inappropriate” or “not appropriate” (13 mentions), but these comments overwhelmingly referred to the political appropriateness of appearing in *Vogue* during wartime rather than to Zelenska’s bodily posture or femininity. The only comment directly urging Zelenska to “close her legs” appeared within this context.

These findings stand in sharp contrast to the dominant media framing of the controversy. Analysis of the collected news articles revealed highly repetitive narrative structures and wording across outlets. The dominant frame presented Zelenska as having been criticised for sitting in an “unfeminine,” “manly,” or “not ladylike” way, while the #sitlikeagirl campaign was framed as a feminist response challenging sexist gender norms. Across the news articles, the controversy followed a remarkably stable narrative: *Vogue* cover → sexist backlash → feminist hashtag activism → solidarity. For example, ITV News introduced the campaign by stating that “Ukrainian women are posing for photographs seated with their legs apart in support of the war-torn country’s First Lady, after she was targeted with misogynistic criticism” (“Why women are posting,” 2022).

The repeated wording appears to stem less from a formal press release than from syndicated journalism and cross-platform repetition. In particular, the NPR/Ashley Westerman article, later republished by several public radio and news outlets, appears to have significantly shaped the English-language framing of the campaign. Many articles also identified Ukrainian journalist Zoya Zvynyatskivska as the initiator of the flashmob. Observations of Twitter activity further revealed multiple Ukrainian journalists and diaspora accounts actively amplifying the campaign through mutual mentions, reposts, and retweets.

5. Discussion

5.1. Participative War and Misinformation

The main and truly striking finding of this study is the near-absence of explicitly sexist criticism within the analysed comment dataset despite widespread transnational English-language news coverage repeatedly framing the controversy as a case of misogynistic backlash directed at Zelenska’s bodily posture. Consequently, none of the participants of the flashmob who posted their pictures across social media platforms appear to have conducted their own search into the original criticism and instead entered the initiative fully trusting the framing offered by the campaign’s initiators and media.

These discrepancies reveal an important characteristic of contemporary misinformation, namely a participatory willingness to trust information and further curate and amplify it. In the context of Russian government-driven information warfare, Golovchenko et al. (2018, p. 978), in their social network analysis examining how narratives surrounding the MH17 plane crash circulated online, found that citizens become

not merely purveyors but active curators of both disinformation and counter-disinformation, particularly in emotionally heated political conflicts. What their study, due to the methods used, could not fully analyse is whether citizens are consciously aware of their involvement in spreading disinformation and what motivates their engagement in such communicative campaigns. While the study focuses on Russian populations and information environments, it points toward a broader dynamic characteristic of the contemporary era of "infoglut" (Andrejevic, 2013), in which users overwhelmed by excessive volumes of information increasingly seek refuge in familiar informational patterns, recognisable explanations, and emotionally compelling readings suggested by trusted publics and media actors. As Golovchenko et al. (2018) themselves suggest, many users participate in amplifying contested narratives not necessarily out of ideological commitment, but because they trust particular media sources, identify emotionally with specific political communities, or seek coherent interpretations within fragmented wartime information environments.

Disinformation and misinformation, even if orchestrated at higher levels by individuals, institutions, or governmental bodies and subsequently amplified through the algorithmic ordering of social media infrastructures, become emotionally real, truthful, and immediate for those participating in their circulation (Silverman et al., 2021). This is what Hoskins (2020) describes as the digital disruption of the relationship between warfare and society, taking place through collective sharing, emotional connectivity, and continuous participation in wartime information flows. Such affective participation acquires particular force within contexts of war, especially in postcolonial settings marked by anxieties surrounding national identity, sovereignty, and survival.

It is therefore unsurprising that the affective dimensions of contemporary mediatised warfare have become an ongoing area of scholarly interest, visible in the emerging body of work linking affect, militarisation, and pleasure (e.g., Adams & Gaeta, 2024). Emotional and embodied reactions to a gut-wrenching conflict affecting individuals' families and communities may also function as an unconscious cultural response against the depoliticisation of war more broadly. Blacksin (2024), in his work on contemporary humanitarian-coded war journalism, argues that media practices which appear critical of violence often simultaneously depoliticise war itself, obscuring geopolitical interests and structural dynamics while ultimately legitimising official rationales for warfare. Similar mechanisms can be observed in ad hoc, community-driven, participatory campaigns such as #sitlikeagirl, which, coded as a social campaign against gender discrimination, obscures the political and economic dynamics underpinning the war as well as broader calls for military aid.

The #sitlikeagirl campaign therefore demonstrates how participatory war communication increasingly operates through affective alignment rather than verification, functioning as a case of misinformation amplified by the strong willingness of participants to visibly demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine's First Lady and, through this visibility, support Ukraine's wartime cause on a global scale.

5.2. Fem-Washing of War

Despite the absence of widespread misogynistic commentary, the controversy was rapidly translated into a recognisable feminist hashtag campaign centred on bodily posture, solidarity, and empowerment. These values were further embedded in the movement through infographics of the *Vogue* cover annotated with commentaries explaining why the photoshoot constituted an instantly iconic feminist artefact.

The flashmob's viral hashtag #sitlikeagirl plays with the phrase "like a girl," historically used as an insult, and flips it into something empowering. The slogan suggests that being "like a girl" is powerful, confident, stylish, and successful rather than weak. Through its hashtag, strategy, and aesthetics, the campaign attempts to mimic the long-standing tradition of neoliberalised commercial campaigns featuring feminism, a tendency previously conceptualised as consumer activism and more recently discussed through notions of woke capitalism, woke marketing, and feminist advertising (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Sobande, 2020; Szpyrko, 2026). Such campaigns encourage consumers to stand by political values through forms of consumer behaviour that simultaneously support and promote commercial brands. Famous examples include Always's "Like a Girl" campaign, Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, McCann New York's "Fearless Girl" campaign, and Adidas's limited-edition "Slay Like a Girl" tank tops, all released in the 2010s. The familiarity of such campaigns contributes to an impression of continuity, allowing #sitlikeagirl to draw visibility and symbolic legitimacy from pre-existing activist and commercial feminist discourses. As social movement scholars have long argued, activist mobilisation frequently depends on the reuse of familiar cultural frames, symbolic repertoires, and emotionally recognisable narratives that allow participants to quickly identify with a cause and reproduce it across contexts (Snow et al., 1986; Tarrow, 2011).

It is worth situating #sitlikeagirl more broadly within the trajectory of feminist-adjacent cultural campaigning. McRobbie (2009) famously argued that postfeminism is a cultural sensibility that simultaneously takes feminism into account while rendering it unnecessary, incorporating selected feminist ideas into cultural common sense while displacing collective feminist politics. Feminist collectivity sees its resurgence in what Gill (2016) identifies as the emergence of post-postfeminism, a digitally mediated return of interest in feminist activism that nevertheless remains entangled with consumer culture, the pursuit of visibility, and self-branding. Both postfeminism and post-postfeminism rely on familiar repertoires of individual self-performance, embodiment, and empowerment rather than structural political transformation. Within the #sitlikeagirl campaign, participants expressed solidarity by recreating Zelenska's pose and publicly aligning not only with Zelenska but, by extension, with Ukraine itself. In this sense, the campaign mobilised postfeminist repertoires of self-expression and mediated visibility while simultaneously becoming incorporated into wartime communication. I therefore describe this phenomenon as digital fem-washing of war, by which I mean the incorporation of feminist language, visibility, and activist aesthetics into wartime communication in ways that soften, personalise, and morally legitimise military and geopolitical narratives. Rather than suggesting that feminist actors consciously promote war, the concept captures how recognisable feminist repertoires become articulated to broader projects of nation branding, international solidarity, and geopolitical legitimacy. In the present case, feminist discourse became attached less to documented misogyny than to the broader communicative imperative of supporting Ukraine.

The campaign's visual logic depended on reproducibility: women posting near-identical poses accompanied by familiar empowerment language and emotionally affirmative engagement. Its rapid circulation relied on the immediate recognisability of neoliberal feminist templates already deeply embedded within digital culture. Audiences could instantly decode the meaning of the hashtag, pose recreation, empowerment slogans, and solidarity selfies as culturally trained digital reflexes developed through many similar, typically commercial campaigns. If anything, these widely circulated frames of post-postfeminist activism (Gill, 2016) may by 2022 already have appeared exhausted within the late stage of woke capitalist campaigning (Sarkar, 2025), at the threshold of a new political era marked by intensifying authoritarianism, nationalism, and fascism (Merrin & Hoskins, 2025, p. 226).

5.3. War-Time Audiences

One possible interpretation of this over-familiarity of post-postfeminist traits is a strategic one, particularly considering the widespread calls for military support for Ukraine taking place most intensely during the first years of the war. The campaign initiator similarly emphasised on social media that attention should remain focused on military support rather than on the controversy surrounding Zelenska's appearance.

The implication is that while the campaign's immediate goal was to support Zelenska's media visibility, its broader purpose was to generate military and political support for resistance against the progressing Russian invasion and ongoing occupation. While Potapova and O'Sullivan (2024, p. 264) argue that Ukrainian armed resistance and activism function as ways of "(re)negotiating the relationships both with Russia and with the West" and escaping forms of double-coloniality, the crucial aspect of the #sitlikeagirl campaign is ultimately the question of audience.

While attempting to resist both Russian imperialism and unequal dependency on the West, the language of resistance simultaneously has to be articulated through Western cultural frameworks in order to secure military, political, and symbolic investment in Ukraine's struggle for independence. Similar observations are made by Zwarun and Canevez (2023), who demonstrate that the strategic branding of Ukraine toward English-speaking Western audiences can be traced back to at least 2015. They argue:

> Ukraine's digital resistance was being able to brand themselves better to Western allies, taking a page from the Ukrainian president's mastery of social media as a space to challenge Russian narratives about Ukraine. This type of place branding was critical to constructing a network of international allies. (p. 86).

These long-standing aspirational and outward-oriented media practices (e.g., Zherebkina, 2019) have been further amplified by the media-savvy, revolving-door character of Zelensky's transition from celebrity performer to political leader (Roman et al., 2022; Ryabinska, 2022; Spector, 2023), alongside broader political cultures marked by increasingly blurred boundaries between celebrity and politics (Corner & Pels, 2003; Rojek, 2001; Wheeler, 2013). Within this context, Zelenska's representation and the collective campaigning surrounding #sitlikeagirl can be situated within wider dynamics of celebrity politics, affective nation branding, and wartime soft power.

In line with Kaneva's (2023) work on wartime branding, Ukraine has increasingly transformed advertising, visibility, and digital communication into strategic tools of war. The image of Olena Zelenska therefore functions not merely as representation, but as a form of political soft power aimed at reinstating Ukraine's political, cultural, and economic subjectivity for global audiences. These constructions of national identity are articulated through familiar postfeminist aesthetics of empowerment, resilience, professionalism, and aspirational femininity. Within the Ukrainian context, however, such branding carries a deeper postcolonial dimension. Highly mediatised campaigns such as #sitlikeagirl therefore operate not only as feminist or cultural expressions, but also as strategic attempts to secure geopolitical visibility, military support, and symbolic alignment with the West through globally recognisable digital languages of activism, empowerment, and solidarity.

5.4. The Language of Activism as Discursive Weaponry

In the preceding sections, I explored both the accidental misinformation fuelled by the participatory character of war-related digital media content and the strategic military deployment of the post-postfeminist visual framework underpinning the campaign. My broader argument, however, is that contemporary warfare increasingly appropriates the familiar communicative language of activism. It is not simply feminist campaigning that becomes entangled with war, but also the wider repertoire of activist practices, visual conventions, emotional appeals, and participatory media formats. These communicative forms become political resources through which support, legitimacy, and visibility are mobilised. In this sense, it is not activism alone that becomes weaponised, but the language and affective infrastructures of activism themselves that begin to operate as mediatised forms of discursive weaponry.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to various forms of anti-war activism across different national and ideological contexts, including street protests, digitally mediated resistance, and feminist anti-war organising (Bygnes, 2025; Kuteleva, 2025; Ratilainen et al., 2025a, 2025b; Sharova, 2022; Zhaivoronok, 2026), alongside academic initiatives and public statements that significantly divided the landscape of gender studies scholarship itself (Hendl, 2022; Hendl et al., 2024; Johnson, 2023; Potapova & O'Sullivan, 2024; Zablotsky, 2022). Zwarun and Canevez (2023, p. 81), for example, identify "volunteerism" and grassroots civil society as widespread tactics among Ukrainian citizens, emerging from both mistrust toward institutions and "Ukrainian's familiarity with and competence at handling matters for themselves." Academic literature has similarly discussed citizen initiatives that either framed themselves explicitly as activism (Rachok, 2024) or were subsequently framed as such by scholars (Krivonos et al., 2024; Lozka, 2024).

Consequently, a growing body of scholarship has begun examining the increasingly blurred boundaries between activism, branding, digital participation, and wartime communication (Ratilainen et al., 2025a, 2025b; Zhaivoronok, 2026). Zhaivoronok's (2026) analysis of the feminist anti-war resistance, for instance, demonstrates how the contradiction between collectivism and individualism re-emerges within platformed activism through neoliberal regimes of visibility, in which political participation becomes increasingly dependent on communicative self-branding, media visibility, and platform-driven attention economies.

Importantly, this dynamic is not specific to feminist activism, but reflects a broader condition of contemporary digital culture in which, as Hoskins (2020, p. 142) argues, "the displayed virality of social media affords a sense of feeling active, of participation in a swarm-like momentum gathering around an image and behind a cause." Such sensations of participation become especially intensified during periods of ongoing war, when highly mediatised conflicts exceed the boundaries of the news cycle and enter everyday emotional life, functioning as vehicles for indignation, helplessness, moral urgency, and political identification.

What becomes visible through campaigns such as #sitlikeagirl is therefore the projection of familiar patterns of identity politics and digitally mediated activism associated with the 2010s onto actual military conflict. This is particularly significant where civilians possess limited direct agency over military decision-making, which remains shaped by geopolitical structures operating beyond individual control. Under such conditions, more emotionally available and culturally familiar forms of action, namely activism, visibility work, hashtag participation, and digital campaigning, emerge as accessible modes of political engagement and affective intervention.

This broader transformation can further be situated within what Merrin and Hoskins (2025) describe as "sharded media," namely deeply polarised communicative environments structured through fragmented realities, partisan information flows, and competing affective truths. Intensified further by digitally saturated warfare (Fuchs, 2025; Merrin & Hoskins, 2025), these media ecologies increasingly produce self-contained informational worlds shaped by algorithmic amplification, disinformation, and participatory circulation. Political communication consequently becomes inseparable from visibility, affect, identity performance, and emotional alignment.

Rather than functioning simply as feminist solidarity, the #sitlikeagirl campaign demonstrates how the visual and rhetorical language of marketing and postfeminist activism can be repurposed toward explicitly political and military ends. The campaign mobilises a familiar neoliberal and deeply affective communicative repertoire rooted in visibility, empowerment, and self-performance, while simultaneously operating within broader geopolitical struggles over legitimacy, recognition, and military support. What emerges is a form of weaponised virality in which the language of activism itself becomes absorbed into the communicative infrastructures of contemporary digital war.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I examined the emergence of the #sitlikeagirl campaign following the controversy surrounding Olena Zelenska's 2022 *Vogue* photoshoot. Through a conjunctural cross-platform analysis of Instagram comments, media coverage, and the circulation of the hashtag across social media, the article demonstrated a significant discrepancy between the dominant media framing of the controversy and the primary discourse visible within the original comment sections. While journalistic coverage repeatedly described Zelenska as targeted by misogynistic criticism concerning her allegedly "unfeminine" posture, the analysed comments predominantly criticised the political and aesthetic implications of glamourising war through fashion media. I therefore argued that the viral feminist framing of the campaign emerged less as a direct response to observable sexism and more as a participatory and affective form of wartime digital communication shaped by platform logics, emotional alignment, and globally recognisable postfeminist activist aesthetics.

What appears to suffer in this process is the radical potential of feminism and feminist activism itself, which here becomes employed as a mechanism of virality-making or what I call fem-washing of war, a vehicle for establishing and articulating moral legitimacy within digitally mediated warfare. The #sitlikeagirl campaign imitates already neoliberalised rhetorics, aesthetics, and communicative tactics associated with postfeminist digital culture, relying on seemingly universal claims of empowerment, solidarity, and visibility characterised by convenient transnationality detached from embodied locality and geopolitical specificity. Participatory and highly mediatised war breeds misinformation as part of the fragmented and sharded realities of deeply polarised digital media environments. Within these conditions, emotionally charged and participatory communicative practices become intertwined with military, geopolitical, and symbolic struggles over legitimacy, recognition, and support.

Consequently, the campaign contributes to the articulation of a vision in which the mediatised war in Ukraine revives Cold War-style rhetoric of a global culture war centred on clashes of values surrounding gender, sexuality, and civilisation itself (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Makhortykh & Bastian, 2022; Ptaszek et al., 2024). Within this broader geopolitical imaginary, the campaign also became incorporated into Ukraine's

wartime positioning as a European democracy aligned with liberal values, including gender equality. The mobilisation of feminist discourse therefore functioned not only as a response to the controversy itself but also as part of a wider communicative narrative distinguishing Ukraine from Russia's self-professed defence of "traditional values." This does not imply that such values are uncontested within Ukraine itself; rather, they acquired particular strategic significance within wartime communication. In this sense, emancipatory movements and feminist language became mobilised, often by individuals personally and tragically affected by the invasion, as rhetorical and affective resources within broader geopolitical struggles. The campaign thus operated as an extension of warfare itself within the participatory and hypermediated infrastructures of social media (Hoskins, 2020; Merrin, 2019).

At the same time, the contradictions embedded within the campaign point toward broader tensions surrounding post-Soviet feminisms, wartime femininities, and the politics of visibility in contemporary Ukraine, questions that extend beyond the scope of this article and require further dedicated analysis. While the campaign deploys the sanitised and globally recognisable language of transnational postfeminism, its purpose is fundamentally tied to material questions of war, survival, and geopolitical agency. Future research could therefore further examine how wartime Ukrainian femininities negotiate the tensions between embodiment and visibility, local political realities and transnational feminist aesthetics, as well as between postcolonial self-articulation and the strategic adoption of Western-facing communicative frameworks.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset analysed in this study is not publicly available to protect the privacy of social media users and avoid redistributing potentially identifiable user-generated content.

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LLM tools were used during the preparation of this article for language editing, stylistic revision, and reference formatting.

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