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Mediatization and Mystique. Volodymyr Zelensky's Self-Presentation on Instagram*

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: This study uses mediatization theory and Goffman's concept of self-presentation to explain the inseparable role of social media in the rise of Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukrainian politics and, since the Russian invasion, world consciousness. From the start, his political persona has been governed far more by media logic than political calculation, although the former has translated into the latter.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The analysis explores how Zelensky develops an iconic communication style through visual framing and other mediation techniques. Towards this end, we conduct a visual content analysis of images posted to his official Instagram account across three points in time: his candidacy, presidency before the invasion, and first year of the invasion. 100 images are sampled from each time period and subjected to detailed visual and nonverbal analysis.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: Employing framing theory and Goffman's notion of self-presentation, the study explains the Ukrainian leader's skillful use of visual and nonverbal messaging to project an image of an everyman president and, beginning with the February 2022 invasion, emergent soldier-in-chief. The analysis also shows how specific visual appeals (e.g., facial

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expressions, Ukrainian symbols) and background settings influence Zelensky's presentation over time.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Results show how the inclusion of more political, and then diplomatic and military, elites in posts during his presidency and year one of the invasion positions Zelensky as a recognized leader while solidifying his status as soldier-in-chief. Indeed, the ubiquity and universality of his soldier persona have become a widely recognized symbol of the fight for democratic freedom.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The study illustrates how Zelensky utilizes social media, Instagram in particular, as a platform for compelling self-presentation while communicating a message of national unity and resolve. His ubiquitous media presence has introduced a new perspective on leadership during wartime.

KEYWORDS:

mediatization, self-presentation, visual framing, Ukraine, Zelensky, Instagram

INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the largest ground war in Europe since WWII, has dominated public discourse in a way few conflicts can. Shaping public perceptions of the war, however, are the key personalities at the heart of the conflict. Volodymyr Zelensky, comedian and actor-turned-politician – turned wartime commander and global defender of Western values – has been the face of the conflict. Zelensky's active advocacy of the Ukrainian cause has been broadcast worldwide through multiple media channels daily, garnering support as he conveys optimism and resolve: "The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride" (Associated Press, 2022, para. 2).

While on-the-ground battles between Ukrainian and Russian forces grind on, perceptions of the war have arguably been conditioned by a key factor operating in the background: mediatization. Mediatization, which Hjarvard (2008) describes as the growing influence of media on key sectors of society, has played a significant role in Zelensky's self-presentation, specifically on social media. As media influence at all levels grows, politicians can no longer ignore their significance and must increasingly adapt to a media logic (Strömbäck,

2008). Since the lead-up to his presidential campaign in 2018, Zelensky has embraced a media logic in his leadership style. Indeed, the aggregation of visual maneuvers found on Zelensky's social media pages, especially Instagram, enable him to fashion a digital persona that has evolved dramatically over time and is unique among world leaders. To examine the self-presentation techniques employed by Zelensky during his mediatized ascent, this study performs a quantitative content analysis of his Instagram photos from his time as a presidential candidate, to president of Ukraine, to wartime leader.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Presentation Style

Goffman (1959) describes the construction of a preferred and desirable image as a process of visual self-presentation. People, referred to as actors in the self-presentation framework, perform both frontstage and backstage behavior. Frontstage behavior is active and conscious, implying that the actor is putting on a performance of their desired image because they are aware of being observed. Featured in the frontstage is the setting, which includes background items that form the scene. In addition to the physical elements that make up the setting, the frontstage also includes a personal front, which includes the other items of expression. The elements that make up the personal front region are closely associated with the performer themselves, so much so that viewers naturally expect these elements when they see the performer (Goffman, 1959).

In contrast, backstage behavior involves the actor without the façade. This presumed private region is not shown to the public and serves as an environment where the actor can privately adjust characteristics and flaws and rehearse performances. The actor knows that the backstage is a space to which audience members have no access, thus guaranteeing that any out-of-character actions that take place in the backstage are not visible (Goffman, 1959).

Although much effort can be put into effectively organizing the front and backstages of individual behavior, another significant consideration in self-presentation is the relationship between the way the

actor expresses themselves and how viewers are impressed by them. The frontstage is a projected image disseminated to target publics through the media, which results in a perceived image in the minds of message recipients (Alberti & De Serio, 2020). In the context of performance, when the audience's perception does not align with an actor's projected image, they are likely to experience a disruption or expectancy violation that could potentially tarnish the performance. Therefore, actors must fine tune their performances in the name of 'saving the show' (Goffman, 1959, p. 212). In the era of digital communications, self-presentation strategies have been developed and refined on social media, resulting in the emergence of accessible personae (Campus, 2010; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021).

Social Media and the Rediscovery of the Middle Region

While Goffman's (1959) self-presentation concept serves as a useful analytical framework for how political figures organize front and back regions to personally influence how they are perceived, the evolution of mass and now digital media have opened new spaces for political image crafting and performance. Since the rise of television, political figures have used media channels to put themselves under a figurative microscope, revealing seemingly intimate details of their lives. But the distinction between frontstage and backstage portrayals is not always clear cut. When front region portrayals no longer exclusively reside on the public stage and back region depictions no longer exclusively reside behind-the-scenes, a new domain of political depiction opens.

Meyrowitz (1986) describes this as the middle region of politics. In his analysis, electronic media have blurred the lines of once-distinct social roles, which in turn affects the self-presentation styles of leaders. Building on Goffman's (1959) stage analogy, the middle region consists of a side stage view combining elements of both front and back regions. Additionally, the middle region allows the audience to see the performer transition from region to region, which leads to a loss of presentational control (Meyrowitz, 1977) – but could in today's social media era be perceived as more authentic and real.

Mediatization of Politics and Conflict

The concept of mediatization aids in explaining how burgeoning media influence and individual reliance on communication technology shapes society. According to Hjarvard (2008), mediatization should be examined from two angles: first, news media are an independent institution that other institutions accommodate; and second, media have become an incorporated aspect of other institutions such as politics, entertainment, or religion. The campaign tactics of populist actors, which aim to sidestep mainstream media scrutiny and gate-keeping, have become especially intertwined with the mediatization of politics through alternative and social media channels. According to Mazzoleni (2014), populist actors possess a unique savviness that allows them to gain and keep media attention and an ability “to perfectly understand the imperatives of the media, what is newsworthy and what is not” (p. 52).

Although there are several factors that contribute to the public’s perception of political figures, research indicates that visual communication plays the most significant role in today’s politics (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Lilleker & Veneti, 2023; Seiter & Weger, 2020). In the context of politics, images often elicit a stronger response from viewers than written or spoken narratives on account of their accessibility and associative qualities. By evoking and forming linkages to relevant concepts, they have the capacity to connect leaders to broader themes. As Lilleker (2019) observes, ‘each image builds a schema around a candidate or leader, the schema may form around strong associations with hope, unity, patriotism, economic stability, strength in foreign policy, protection against internal threats or a myriad other desires or threats citizens have internalized’ (pp. 2–3).

Indeed, social media platforms are now an integral element of mediatization processes, including their growing role in war and conflict (e.g., Zhang, 2021). Social media platforms further the mediatization process in wars and conflicts by creating a joint space where news organizations and news audiences can present and discuss the conflict at hand.

Visual Framing

A truism now supported with ample empirical evidence, visual messages and the elements within them typically elicit stronger and more lasting cognitive and emotional responses than verbal messages (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). A visual framing analysis of social media posts addressing the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 examined how the conflict was framed from pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian perspectives on Vkonakte, a social networking site (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017). Classifying the content of the images through visual characteristics such as the presence of civilians and military personnel, military equipment, damage, dead bodies, and the perceived gender of people featured in the image, the study found that pro-Ukrainian online groups framed the conflict in a patriotic manner, namely as ‘the good war,’ while Pro-Russian groups framed the conflict as a destructive humanitarian crisis (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017, p. 376).

Research has also investigated levels of personalization found in Instagram content and how these individual touches influence user engagement. A study of the visual content posted by U.S. politicians on the platform found that more personalized depictions, such as scenes of nonpolitical environments, posts of faces, and photographs displaying emotion, correlate with high audience engagement (Peng, 2021). By contrast, political posts that depict traditional, professional, and less-personalized activities generated less engagement, suggesting that social media audiences are more likely to interact with personalized content over portrayals that feel like ‘politics-as-usual’ (Peng, 2021, p. 159).

Considering the capacity of Instagram to serve as a platform for political self-presentation and Zelensky’s robust use of the application, the following multi-part research question is posed:

RQ1: What are the visual characteristics of Zelensky’s Instagram photos (a) before he was elected president; (b) while in office but before the Russian invasion; and, (c) after the Russian invasion once Ukraine was engulfed in war?

Interpretations of facts, stories, or people often depend on the way they are framed. According to Chong and Druckman (2007), framing involves “the process by which people develop a particular

conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (p. 104). Importantly, frames can manifest through words and images, leading audiences to construct realities around certain issues or events (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Through the process of frame emphasis, the way in which developments are presented may influence the way in which they are perceived. In political environments, even the smallest of changes to routine depictions can have an effect on public opinion.

Although text has traditionally been the default option for framing analysis, visuals can have a more potent and lasting effect. As a result, images are now widely acknowledged as central to the framing process in politics and media (Coleman, 2010; Grabe & Bucy, 2011; Parry, 2011). Visual framing refers to the suggestion of meaning emphasis in an image (or stream of images, in the case of video), often involving the emphasis of one view, scene, or angle over others in the image selection process (Coleman, 2010). Further, frames are identified and examined through the use of symbols. Symbols can either be abstract, such as shapes or objects that have meaning or value, or figurative, representing people, places, and things with symbolic value. These visual symbols can effectively construct narratives for audiences more than other types of frames because they are often rooted in culture (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011; Yakin & Totu, 2014).

The self-presentation of political actors can be documented through the identification of visual frames. Grabe and Bucy (2009, 2011) identify two prominent visual frames in news coverage of U.S. presidential elections, the *ideal candidate* and *populist campaigner*, each of which contain two subdimensions. The ideal candidate frame consists of a *statesmanship* dimension, indicated when politicians are shown meeting or hobnobbing with other elected officials, often amid patriotic backdrops and campaign paraphernalia, and *compassion*, which may feature visual linkages to family, children, and religious symbols. The populist campaigner frame, by contrast, consists of a *mass appeal* dimension, evidenced by visual linkages to celebrities or large, approving audiences, and *ordinariness*, including portrayals of political leaders in informal attire, engaging in interactions with ordinary people, or participating in athletic activities.

An analysis by Steffan (2020) examining visual social media posts from the accounts of politicians from seven Western democracies

investigated the role of visual frames in candidate self-presentation. The results suggest that Instagram is the ideal social media platform for self-presentation during campaigns. Additionally, the analysis showed that candidates were more likely to use the ideal candidate frame over other visual frames in their self-presentation on Instagram (Steffan, 2020).

Visual framing analyses can also be applied to images depicting war and conflict. Mediatized images of war carry strategic and symbolic value and, through circulation on social media, have the capacity to influence and motivate audiences globally. Parry (2011) conducted a visual framing analysis of images depicting the 2003 Iraqi invasion from print media in the United Kingdom and found that repetitive portrayals of coalition involvement reinforced humanitarian frames and liberation narratives despite the war's obvious aggressive nature. For the present study, visual frames will be identified by aggregating individual visual elements within Zelensky's Instagram posts into larger visual frames using the framework developed by Grabe and Bucy (2009, 2011).

Considering the capability of Instagram to serve as an effective platform for political self-presentation through visual framing, the following multi-part research question is asked:

RQ2: What visual frames are featured in Zelensky's Instagram photos (a) before he was elected president; (b) while in office but before the Russian invasion; and, (c) after the Russian invasion once Ukraine was engulfed in war?

The research questions explore how the application of different visual characteristics and frames shown in Zelensky's Instagram photos evolve from his time as a comedian and television actor to wartime president. However, a finer-grained assessment of Zelensky's self-presentation style could reveal whether part of his visual strategy includes a growing degree of transparency via back region portrayals to convey a sense of heightened authenticity and openness. Such findings could yield useful insights in regard to the mediatization of politics and conflict. Therefore, a third research question is posed:

RQ3: How does the visual portrayal of Zelensky's front and backstage behaviors on Instagram vary over time as he progresses from presidential candidate to defender of Ukraine against the Russian invasion?

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

To address these research questions, a content analysis was performed. We began by categorizing the population of images into three timeframes, determined by the date the post was made. The first timeframe, Candidate, consists of 171 images posted between May 19, 2018 and May 19, 2019 while Zelensky was campaigning for and elected to office. The second timeframe, President, consists of 497 images posted between May 20, 2019, when Zelensky was sworn in, and February 23, 2022, the day before the invasion. And the third timeframe, Invasion, consists of 823 images posted between February 24, 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, to February 24, 2023, a year later.

The sampling periods for both President and Invasion time periods consists of images that were either posted individually or that appeared first in multi-image albums posted to Instagram. This criterion was not applied for images within the Candidate timeframe due to the relatively small number of images compared to the two other timeframes. To assemble the images for analysis, a random (skip interval) sampling technique was employed to randomly select 100 images from each timeframe. Altogether, 300 posts were analyzed.

For purposes of this study, visual characteristics are defined as smaller individual elements depicted within the images, such as people and Ukrainian symbols. Adapting Saussure's approach, the analysis of visual characteristics in this study will focus on both the physical elements shown in the images as well as the concepts they call forth. The analysis also examines the content of Zelensky's posts at two levels: the overall image, and (in the posts where he is visually present) Zelensky's portrayal within it.

Intercoder Reliability Check

Intercoder reliability was established by coding 10% of the sample across each timeframe. The codebook was developed through a collaborative process of identifying key features of each first image

and assessing for consistency across images. Once the codebook was finalized (in the spring of 2023), each author independently coded 10 images from each of the study's three time periods, or 30 images total: before Zelensky was elected president, during his presidency but before the invasion, and for the first year of the invasion.

A detailed codebook with variable definitions was developed to document the presence or absence of each defined category (available from the authors). Photographic features were documented at two levels of analysis: first, the photograph overall, and second, at the individual level of Zelensky. Variables at the level of the photograph included structural features such as shot length and camera angle, as well as elements within the shot including other people, their roles and estimated ages. Other visuals such as Ukrainian symbols and outcomes of war including ruins, casualties, military equipment and depictions of adversaries were also documented.

Variables unique to Zelensky's portrayals included whether the photo was a selfie and if he appeared alone in the shot, the percentage of the frame his image filled, and basic facial expressions – positive, negative, and neutral. Positive expressions were categorized into natural and posed smiles. We documented who Zelensky was pictured with, including politicians, journalists, supporters, civilians, military, and family members. Coding also assessed his style of dress, grooming, and his level of agency or activity. Gestures were also coded and categorized into agentic and defiant gestures. We also documented the type of activity Zelensky was participating in, including athletic activity, show business, volunteering, and addressing an audience. Lastly, the visual characteristics of each post were assessed in aggregate to determine whether the images could be coded into visual frame categories such as statesmanship, compassion, ordinariness, mass appeal, and a new 'soldier-in-chief' frame.

Intercoder reliability was calculated using Freelon's ReCal2 online tool for two coders. Because the variables coded were nominal, manifest, and non-normally distributed (showing low variability), percent agreement is reported instead of alpha reliability scores (see Feng, 2015). Although percent agreement does not make allowances for chance agreement, it is appropriate for nominally scaled coding under these conditions. Coding of all variables used in the analysis showed a high level of agreement. Across all 59 nominal variables

in the dataset, minor disagreements only arose in five instances, resulting in 96.6% agreement in those cases. For all other nominal variables in the reliability coding, there was perfect agreement. For the single ordinal variable in the dataset (image setting), agreement was also 96.6%.

FINDINGS

Visual Characteristics

To begin with, we present screen captures of images from each time period in the analysis. Panel 1 shows the kinds of images Zelensky shared while running for office, Panel 2 shows the ways in which he portrayed himself during the early part of his presidency, and Panel 3 shows the dramatically different visual landscape of the third, war period. Each time period is characterized by a markedly distinct presentational style. As a candidate, Zelensky is more candid and personal, while as president he quickly becomes officious and embraces his (now real) role of servant of the people. By the third period of the Russian invasion, the tenor of the imagery is much darker and destructive, showing a serious Zelensky embracing his new role as soldier-in-chief and defender of the national interest.

RQ1 asked what visual characteristics were present in Zelensky's Instagram posts before he was elected to office, during his presidency, and during the first year of the Russian invasion. To measure the presence of different visual characteristics across timeframes, frequency and cross-tabulation tests were conducted for each relevant variable. In the interest of providing parsimonious results, we limit our observations here to some longitudinal trends over time. Detailed descriptive results for all variables are provided in an online appendix.

As time progresses, Zelensky is featured in fewer and fewer photos; moreover, his focus transitions from his own activities and likeness to that of other people. In the Invasion timeframe, the conflict with Russia moves to the forefront. Although the frequency of civilians featured on Zelensky's Instagram stays relatively consistent over time, the presence of Zelensky interacting with them does not. As

time evolves, Zelensky is shown with fewer civilians and colleagues from entertainment projects. Instead, the proportion of images of Zelensky shown with political figures and members of the Ukrainian military increases. As shown in Fig. 1, the proportion of images showing Zelensky with political figures and military members is higher in the latter time periods than during the campaign phase.

Panel 1. Zelensky's Instagram photos from the Candidate timeframe



Panel 2. Zelensky's Instagram photos from the President timeframe



Panel 3. Zelensky's Instagram photos from the Soldier timeframe

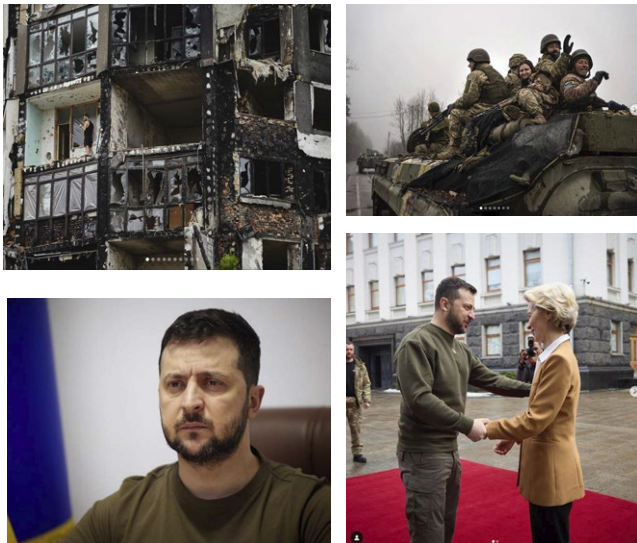
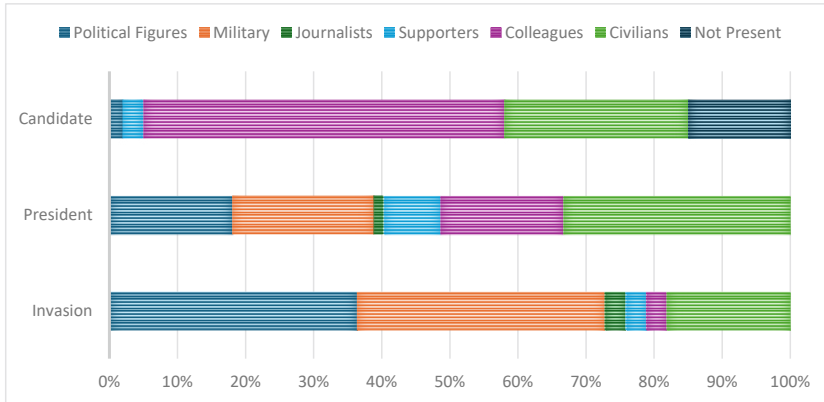


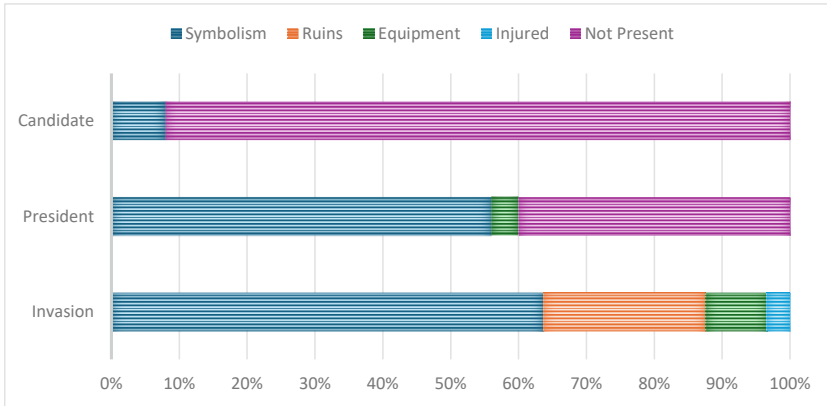
Figure 1. Individuals shown with Zelensky over time



Source: Authors' original analysis.

Reflecting a heightened orientation towards the state, the presence of Ukrainian symbolism increases from 8% in the Candidate timeframe to 56% in both President and Invasion timeframes (see Fig. 2). Regardless of whether Zelensky is in the image, depictions of patriotism increase once he is in office. Interestingly, the proportion of Ukrainian symbolism in images *with* Zelensky increases dramatically from the Candidate to President timeframe and remains higher than in images without Zelensky (see Fig. 4). Injured individuals are only present after the invasion. Although images of bombed-out buildings and ruins are only present in the Invasion timeframe, none of these images feature Zelensky. All images in the President timeframe that show military equipment also feature Zelensky, but in the Invasion timeframe, none of the images with military equipment feature Zelensky. There are no images that feature enemy forces or dead individuals on Zelensky's Instagram, whether he is in the image or not.

Figure 2. Objects, symbols, and injured shown in images over time



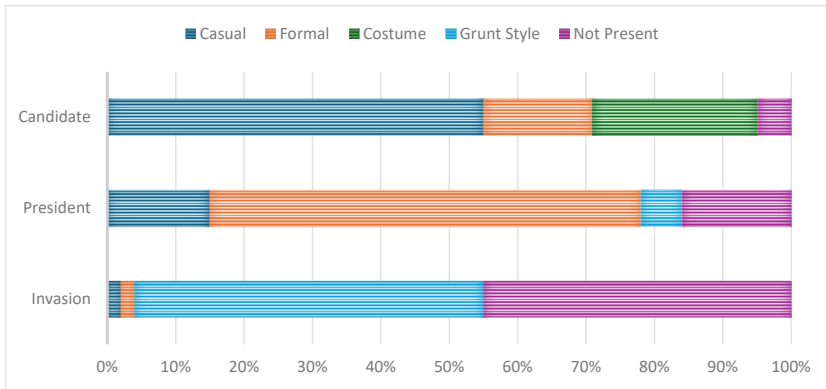
Source: Authors' original analysis.

The evolution of setting, activity, and physical appearance in Zelensky's Instagram photos is another factor to consider when evaluating his self-presentation on the platform. Of the 93 images in the Candidate timeframe that feature Zelensky, 43.01% depict a showbusiness setting and 50.54% show him acting or performing in front of an audience or participating in promotional activities for entertainment projects. Similarly, 11.82% show Zelensky in a gym and 13.98% depict him participating in some sort of athletic activity. As shown in Fig. 3, Zelensky's style of dress is mostly casual or involves costumes related to entertainment projects. His grooming style is neat, and nearly half of the images with Zelensky depict agentic behavior, suggesting an active presence and dynamism (see online appendix). Zelensky's larger projected image in the Candidate timeframe revolves around his position as a comedic television actor, assisted by portrayals of ordinariness and normalcy.

Zelensky's casualness and everyday portrayals of ordinariness transition to more diplomatic and traditional portrayals as he takes office. Of the 84 images in the President timeframe that feature Zelensky, approximately one-fourth feature scenes from government buildings. He is also depicted outdoors, both in the streets and out in nature. Zelensky begins to volunteer with civilians and military

personnel and delivers speeches in front of audiences more frequently in this timeframe. Zelensky shows agency in 41.67% of these images, further projecting that he operates with an active presence. Additionally, he is mostly shown in formal attire; depictions of him in casual outfits constitute just 17.86% of his images during this timeframe. Consistent with this formal style, his grooming is almost always neat (see Fig. 5).

Figure 3. Variations in Zelensky’s clothing style over time



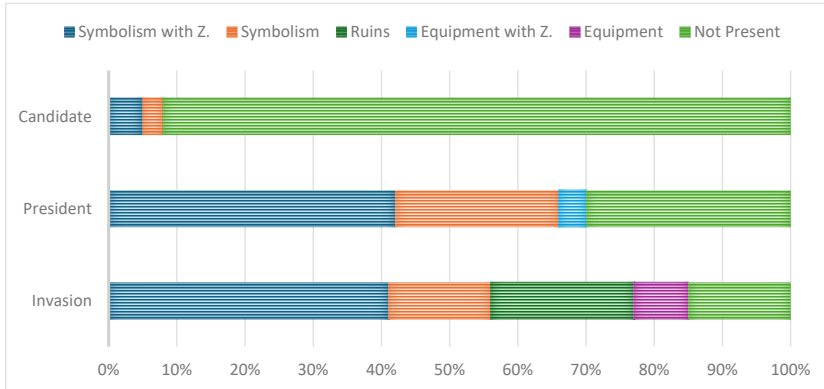
Source: Authors’ original analysis.

Once Russia invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, Zelensky seemingly transformed from president to ‘soldier-in-chief,’ growing a beard and wearing his signature camouflage green t-shirt or sweatshirt, or plain button-down shirt. Of the 57 images in the Invasion timeframe that feature Zelensky, nearly half depict him in his office. The soldier-in-chief role is not a unidimensional field marshal depiction. Rather, Zelensky is often shown sitting at his desk or calmly interacting with others; in other words, modeling a sense of normalcy. Zelensky is depicted delivering speeches in 12.28% of images and volunteering with injured or displaced civilians or members of the Ukrainian military in 8.77%. Zelensky manages to display dynamism in many (40.35%) of these images, depicting agency even if he is in the office. His attire transforms from civilian casual (e.g., entertainment costumes, gym attire) and presidential formality to fatigues and his

now iconic military-style dress (see Fig. 3). As detailed below, his hair and beard are worn longer, and his facial expressions are almost always neutral or negative.

Of the 100 total images analyzed from the Candidate timeframe, Zelensky is featured in almost all ($n = 93$). Zelensky is typically surrounded by people and is shown alone in just 25.81% of these images. In over half (57%) of these posts, he is shown interacting with colleagues, followed by civilians (29.03%). A much smaller percentage of posts portray Zelensky with family members, supporters, political figures or influentials, and journalists. There were no posts depicting Zelensky interacting with members of the Ukrainian military in the Candidate timeframe; however, 5.37% do feature Zelensky with some form of Ukrainian symbolism. None of the images depict ruins, military equipment, enemy forces, or injured or dead individuals (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Visual features in images with and without Zelensky over time

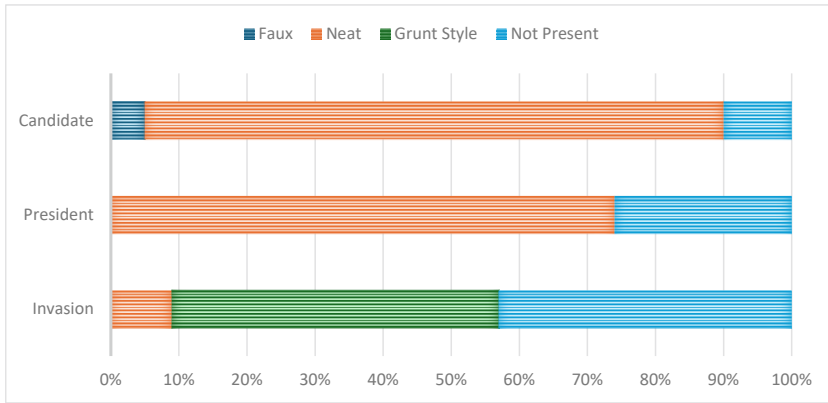


Source: Authors' original analysis.

Of the images in the Candidate timeframe that feature Zelensky, 43.01% depict him in a showbusiness setting, 18.23% outside or in nature, 17.20% on a street in an urban setting, 11.83% in a gym, and 5.38% in an office. A smaller percentage showed Zelensky at an indoor reception, at home, or on some form of transportation. No images belonging to the Candidate timeframe that feature Zelensky in

them took place in a hospital, government building, sites of rubble or destruction, war environment, or sporting event.

Figure 5. Changes in Zelensky’s grooming style over time

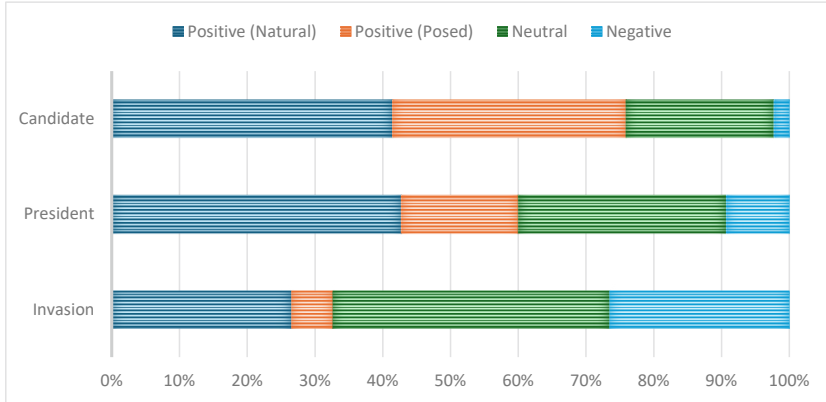


Source: Authors’ original analysis.

The vast majority of images, 94.44%, in the Candidate timeframe that feature Zelensky show him with a neat grooming style, and 5.30% feature Zelensky wearing faux facial hair as part of a costume. None show Zelensky with his now characteristic ‘grunt style,’ a less formal, bearded look usually observed after political figures leave office. Grunt style, which is now also a brand of casual action wear, disregards the niceties of civilian life during peacetime and communicates a muscular posture of defensive readiness. Zelensky only dons it with the Invasion (see Fig. 5).

Of the images in the Candidate timeframe in which Zelensky appears and his facial expression is visible, 41.38% show him with a positive, natural smile, 34.48% with a positive, posed smile, 21.84% with a neutral expression, and just 2.30% with a negative expression (see Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Zelensky’s facial expressions over time



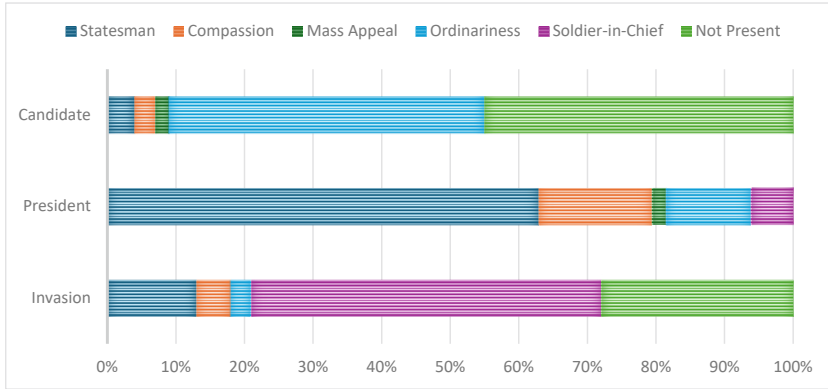
Source: Authors’ original analysis.

Visual Frames

RQ2a asked what visual frames were present in Zelensky’s still image posts on Instagram before and after he was elected to office. To measure the presence of different visual frames in the Candidate timeframe, cross-tabulations were run for each relevant frame variable. The frequency of certain visual frames differed before Zelensky was officially elected to office. For images containing Zelensky that fall into the Candidate timeframe, 49.46% align with the ordinary dimension of the populist campaigner (see Fig. 7). No other frames rival this mode of self-presentation and none of the images with Zelensky within the Candidate timeframe fit the soldier-in-chief frame.

RQ2b asked what visual frames were present in Zelensky’s image posts on Instagram once elected to office but before the start of the Russian invasion. To measure the presence of visual frames in the President timeframe, a cross-tabulation was again conducted for each relevant variable. The frequency of visual frames here suggests a more official political presentation of Zelensky, with the statesman subdimension appearing most prominently (73.81%), followed by compassion (20.24%), ordinariness (15.48%), soldier-in-chief (8.33%), and mass appeal (3.57%). Fig. 7 shows the distribution of visual frames over time.

Figure 7. Visual framing of Zelensky over time



Source: Authors' original analysis.

RQ2c asked what visual frames were present in Zelensky's image posts following the Russian invasion. To measure the presence of visual frames in images in the Invasion timeframe, a cross-tabulation was conducted for each relevant variable. In this timeframe the soldier-in-chief frame becomes most evident, with just over half of all photos featuring Zelensky aligning with it, followed by statesmanship, compassion, and ordinaryness.

Zelensky's Self-Presentation

RQ3 asked how Zelensky's presentation of front and back region behaviors on Instagram evolved from the presidential campaign phase to the Russian invasion. To operationalize self-presentation in images featuring Zelensky, frequency and cross-tabulation tests were conducted for the presence of front and backstage behavior. In the Candidate timeframe, 60.22% of the images depict front region behavior, while 39.78% depict back region behavior. As shown in Panel 1, a majority of the images depicted front region behavior such as performing or acting on the set of his television show. Interestingly, more images (54.76%) depicted Zelensky engaging in back region activities than front region behavior (45.24%). This is represented in

Panel 2, with a combination of images depicting different activities such as Zelensky working in his office or delivering speeches. In the Invasion timeframe, a third of the images (33.33%) depicted Zelensky participating in front region behavior, while two-thirds, 66.67%, depicted him participating in back region activities. Panel 3 highlights this increase in back region behavior by including images of Zelensky working alone at his desk or meeting with other political figures.

DISCUSSION

Visual Characteristics and Visual Frames

Overall, the results suggest an evolution of certain visual characteristics on Zelensky's Instagram page. The visual presence of other elected officials and political elites increases after Zelensky is elected to office, and the proportions of images showing him with political figures and soldiers are at their highest after the Russian invasion. Ukrainian symbolism in images with Zelensky increases from the Candidate to Invasion timeframe, suggesting that direct visual linkages to Zelensky's own patriotism become more prominent with time. Of the images in the President timeframe that feature Zelensky, approximately a quarter take place in a government building, but he is also shown outside and in nature. The increased depictions of Zelensky outdoors or in the streets during the President timeframe reinforce his physical presence, further strengthening his embodiment of the Ukrainian determination to represent and defend the homeland. He now volunteers with civilians and soldiers and delivers speeches in front of audiences more frequently. He is mostly shown in formal attire and his grooming style is neat, yet neutral facial expressions become more prominent than in the Candidate timeframe.

With the invasion, nearly half of his posts show Zelensky in his office while the other half depict government settings. Meanwhile, his attire transforms into fatigues and military-style dress. As he cultivates a 'grunt style' of appearance, his hair and beard are worn longer and his facial expressions are typically neutral or negative. These visual characteristics contribute to the formation of visual

frames over time. During his presidential campaign, Zelensky's self-depictions are marked by their appeals to ordinariness, a sub-dimension of the populist campaigner frame, while once elected he embraces the visual hallmarks of statesmanship. With the invasion, he then pivots again to take on the role of soldier-in-chief, which is when he becomes iconic (albeit, more for his heroism than look, but Zelensky's self-presentation is integral to his iconicity).

Zelensky's Self-Presentation

When considering Zelensky's self-presentation style over the course of the three time periods analyzed here, the results indicate an increased presence of backstage behavior over time, which gives him a more authentic appearance on the surface (Goffman, 1959, p. 113). The presence of images showing Zelensky working in his office, volunteering on what seems to be the front lines, and participating in conversations with other politicians depict activities that aren't always seen by the public. Zelensky, in this case, can be thought of as the curator of the middle region. He is organizing and posting content that contains visual appeals to craft a projected image. In turn, the audience constructs a perceived image of him based on what's shown (Alberti & De Serio, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The results of this analysis contribute to the body of literature surrounding political self-presentation, visual framing, and image formation. It also suggests new implications for political communication research, specifically regarding the mediatization of politics and conflict. In terms of self-presentation, the longitudinal aspect of the study shows marked changes to Zelensky's image over time, with new versions of the Ukrainian leader emerging in each time window. The inclusion of more political, and then diplomatic and military, elites in posts during the last two timeframes illustrates how Zelensky positioned himself as a recognized leader while solidifying his signature soldier-in-chief look, which ironically gave him more of an

everyman appearance. Indeed, like the widely reproduced colors of the Ukrainian flag, the ubiquity and universality of his soldier persona has itself become a kind of symbol of the fight for democratic freedom, advancing the cause by means of soft power projection. The cumulation of these visual characteristics further contributes to Zelensky's particular mystique as a mediatized leader.

In this regard, Zelensky's emergence on the world stage seems highly interconnected with the iconic personal style he has carefully cultivated throughout his rise from entertainer to political leader facing down the much larger Russian military. Consistent with his background as a performer, Zelensky has seamlessly transitioned from an ordinary style of presentation (servant of the people) during his presidential campaign, to embracing the role of statesman before the invasion, to his signature soldier-in-chief style during the war. Thus, the nature of his mystique, or special value as a leader, is built at least in part on his ability to convincingly perform these distinct roles through the visual associations and nonverbal displays documented here but also on his capacity to effortlessly transition from one role to another. This skill of adapting so adroitly to the moment is rare among leaders.

As with any empirical analysis, there are a few limitations to the study design and interpretation worth noting. To begin with, the sample consists only of still images found on Zelensky's Instagram page, excluding video, all the other photographs in his albums, and imagery from other social media and news platforms that could aid in the analysis of self-presentation and projection of soft power. The findings here may not generalize to other media contexts. In addition, we did not consider the content of Zelensky's captions and written text comments, which could influence impressions by giving the images a suggested meaning. Thus, we've only considered the visual dimension of his multimodal communication. Finally, this analysis examines Zelensky's visual messaging through a Western lens. As such, the interpretations elaborated in this study may primarily apply to and resonate with those with a similar cultural orientation. Even within a Western lens, however, additional analysis could further examine the symbolism evident in Zelensky's posts and look, such as subtle patriotic cues or references to popular culture brandished by the soldiers and citizens who appear in his posts.

Despite these limitations, the current study serves as a systematic view of Zelensky's self-presentation, rising from his time as an unlikely presidential candidate to become the face of democratic promise against authoritarian aggression. As a mass-self communicator, Zelensky has adeptly adjusted to the demands of the moment, allowing the world to see the war through his eyes. His construction of political leadership for external audiences has been a highly personalized and mediated affair, consistent with the approach of other successful Western leaders (Campus, 2010). Although more research is needed to further investigate the nuances of Zelensky's visual framing and soft power efforts, as well as the outreach and reception of these efforts, this study establishes a baseline of change over time that allows scholars to understand his role as a mediated wartime leader. His presence on social media, specifically Instagram, has provided a curated view of his personal and political life, visually documented diplomatic efforts on behalf of the Ukrainian people, and allowed him to cultivate a wartime persona that is now iconic.

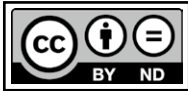
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