

AI-generated Images of Ukrainian Soldiers as a Tool for Media Manipulation in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the first systematic study of information manipulation in social media through images of Ukrainian soldiers generated by artificial intelligence (AI). Focusing on Facebook between 2022 and 2025, the research examines how fabricated soldier images created by generative neural networks have been disseminated for manipulative purposes. Several recurring thematic clusters are identified. Many of the pages spreading such content feature fictitious administrators (often abroad), display automated behavior (bots, automated commenting), and exemplify “coordinated inauthentic behavior” (CIB). For the first time, manipulations using generated images are compared across the Ukrainian and foreign segments of Facebook. The study highlights the risks of eroding trust in social networks amid the spread of the “Dead Internet,” an environment saturated with bots and synthetic content. By analyzing these practices, the article contributes to research on digital manipulation and calls for a deeper conceptualization of AI’s impact on social processes in the context of information warfare.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Social Network, Image Of A Warrior, Manipulation, Dead Internet, CIB, Fake.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been a domain of computer science for over six decades; however, its recent advances have achieved a remarkable scale. This study examines AI-generated imagery and its deployment on social media platforms with the aim of exerting manipulative influence on audiences.

Principal image-generation technologies are grounded in AI algorithms, notably Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) and diffusion models. GANs comprise two neural networks in an adversarial regime: a generator synthesizes counterfeit images, while a discriminator assesses their realism. This architecture is distinguished by its capacity to produce highly photorealistic faces, scenes, and objects. Diffusion models attained broad popularity in 2022–2025, exemplified by systems such as Stable Diffusion. They iteratively denoise random noise into detailed, realistic images conditioned on textual prompts. At present, this class of methods constitutes the dominant approach for producing high-fidelity AI images that are difficult to distinguish from real photographs. AI-generated imagery is increasingly utilized across news media, publishing, and diverse artistic practices; concomitantly, ethical concerns regarding its use are intensifying.

In 2023, Ukrainian internet users increasingly observed the emergence across social media platforms (Facebook, X, Telegram, etc.), the official pages of certain organizations and institutions, and popular personal

blogs of AI-generated depictions of the Russo-Ukrainian War, Ukrainian soldiers, and civilian casualties. The issue rose to prominence through critical blog commentary and, subsequently, analytical articles in various media outlets and early scholarly treatments (Poliakova, 2024). Numerous commentators argued that synthetic images of destruction and victims risked devaluing Ukraine's struggle against the aggressor, instilling in viewers the notion that the war in Ukraine is neither fully intelligible nor unequivocal – hence, that perhaps not everything should be believed. At the same time, it is now possible to note that AI-generated images of destruction and of the aftermath of Russian missile strikes (Malichenko, 2024) appear relatively infrequently; this strand of digital fabrication has not become widespread, possibly because a sufficient corpus of documentary photographs is publicly available.

Instead, on social networks, primarily on Facebook, AI-generated images of Ukrainian soldiers are actively disseminated. We regard these images as an instrument of mass manipulation. Our primary attention is focused on Facebook pages and groups, although it is not limited to this social network (for example, the YouTube channel "God is with you" @God_IsWith_You_ua uses identical images to create short videos). To keep the focus on the subject of our study, we leave out pages and groups that, although they use generated content, do not display generated images of Ukrainian soldiers. The main problems we consider concern: a) the mechanisms of creation and dissemination of manipulative content; b) the comparison of such content in the Ukrainian and other segments of social networks; c) the uncritical perception by the audience of generated visual and textual content.

We do not seek to precisely distinguish between Facebook pages and Facebook groups – particularly because groups are associated with pages filled with manipulative content and, moreover, can masquerade as real people (Avah Gibbs, chika lovecinta, Kayla Turner, Fujian, Aljoan Monisit Orbuda, Kabar Terupdate, Fujian, Emery Hamilton, Андрій Сафрюк, etc.). Overall, these fake structures constitute expansive, entangled "rhizomes" that encompass a significant segment of the social network.

The study relies on four main blocks of sources. 1) *Social media policies and CIB*. N. Gleicher (2018) and N. Gleicher & O. Rodriguez (2018) offer basic explanations and practices for detecting/removing CIB networks on Facebook; N. Clegg (2024) comments on Meta's official position regarding the labeling of photorealistic AI images. A. Romaniuk & O. Snopok (2021) review the scale of content removal on Facebook. 2) *Academic studies of AI-image recognition and theoretical frameworks*. S. D. Bray, Sh. D. Johnson, B. Kleinberg (2023) highlight the results of an experiment assessing people's ability to distinguish "deepfake" faces. A. Yoo Jeong Ha and others (2024) write about distinguishing human art from AI images. Y. Walter (2025) analyzes the Dead Internet Theory. 3) *Journalistic/analytical materials on the operation of algorithms in social networks*. R. DiResta & J. A. Goldstein (2024) describe how AI images are used on Facebook to grow audiences. J. Koebler (2024) examines the "zombie internet" problem. E. Maiberg (2024) considers cases of bypassing moderation on Facebook. M. Harrison Dupré (2024) provides examples of engaging audiences through images of American war veterans. 4) *Ukrainian context: investigations, fact-checking, surveys*. The Institute of Mass Information (2024) conducted an investigation concerning a network of religious pages (connected with The Church of Almighty God). The platform "Behind the news" (2024) identified religious pages and described mechanisms for recruiting participants and monetizing content. R. Lorian (2023) analyzed the risks of ending up on Russian fraudulent websites via clickbait content. M. Poliakova (2024) carried out a preliminary scholarly inquiry into the use of images of Ukrainian soldiers in media manipulations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study is qualitative-analytical, mixed-methods in character and combines: (1) an audit study of Facebook's open functions (in particular, Page Transparency), (2) content analysis of posts and comments, (3) a network review of interconnected pages/groups (rhizome), as well as (4) a comparative analysis of the Ukrainian and foreign segments of social networks. To contextualize the findings, secondary verification was applied using open investigations and Meta documents on Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB).

Subject, Objects, and Units of Analysis

The subject is the manipulative practices of disseminating AI-generated images of Ukrainian servicemembers. The basic units of analysis were: (a) an individual Facebook post containing such images, together with its caption/comments and engagement metrics; (b) a page or group as a "container" of practices (name/renaming, language, geography of administrators, external links, presence of associated groups). Thematically related platforms (for example, YouTube channels that use the same images) were taken into account as auxiliary sources for verifying cross-platform behavior.

Chronological Scope and Coverage

The analysis concerns the period 2022–2025 (with a retrospective review of the history of pages created earlier but activated after February 2022). The principal dataset was sourced from the Ukrainian segment of Facebook; for comparison, selective clusters of English-language and other foreign segments were included.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Only those communities/posts in which AI-generated images of Ukrainian soldiers are directly used were included in the corpus. Pages publishing manipulative political content without such images or with their minimal presence were not included. Instances of identical images circulating in different communities with different captions were recorded separately.

Operationalization of “AI-Generated Image”

To classify visual materials as AI-generated, a set of mutually complementary indicators was applied: (1) anatomical/textural generation artifacts (especially hands, eyes, amputations, and prostheses), (2) incorrect/mixed elements of Ukrainian uniforms, chevrons, state symbols, (3) linguistic defects within the image, “latinization” of Cyrillic, pseudo-Ukrainian inscriptions, (4) absence of credible provenance.

Content Typology

The corpus is organized into thematic blocks identified in a preliminary review: (1) religious pages/groups (prayers, “blessings,” prompts to comment “Amen”); (2) greeting/well-wishing communities; (3) entertainment/“celebrity stories” and clickbait aggregators. Within each block, we cataloged sub-themes responsive to the ongoing wartime context (e.g., “Avdivka asks for prayers,” “young military couples,” “soldiers with amputations”). For each post, we recorded the date, caption text, counts of reactions/comments/shares (where available), the presence of external links, and salient templated administrator replies.

CIB Indicators and Network Analysis

To identify CIB, the following were taken into account: (1) an anomalously large number of administrators and their locations (per Page Transparency), (2) histories of renaming and shifts in thematic niche, (3) schemes for channeling traffic to low-quality external sites, (4) synchronized posts/reposts in satellite groups, (5) inducements to engagement via emotional triggers (“Amen,” “congratulate the hero,” touching stories of orphans, etc.) and templated auto-comments posted by the page.

Comparative Component

To differentiate between universal and Ukraine-specific patterns, we assembled a comparative corpus from foreign platform segments exhibiting analogous manipulative schemes. Cross-segment comparison proceeded at the level of motifs, verbal engagement templates, and network structures.

Analysis of Comments and «Bot-Likeness»

For each thematic cluster, we sampled comments, documenting recurring phrases, the velocity of reactions in “empty” or newly created groups, the openness of commenters’ profiles, and characteristic markers of automated page replies. These indicators informed qualitative judgments about the likely presence of bots or compromised accounts, without estimating prevalence quantitatively (due to data-access constraints).

Ethical Considerations

The analysis relied exclusively on openly available data. Personal data of individual users (non-public persons) were not reproduced; our emphasis was on public pages/groups and aggregated behavioral patterns. No intervention in community activity was undertaken, and direct communication with administrators fell outside the study protocol and is referenced only via secondary sources.

Limitations

(1) Lack of comprehensive access to view metrics and internal algorithms precludes precise quantitative reach estimation. (2) The instability of social-media content complicates corpus reproducibility; to mitigate this risk, we employed screenshots and time-stamped observations. (3) In the absence of a representative random sample, findings are analytical-descriptive rather than inferential-statistical.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first generated images of Ukrainian soldiers appeared in the Ukrainian segment of global social networks, including Facebook, in 2022 – after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (February 2022). This is evidenced by a retrospective analysis of Facebook pages on which such content exists today. A typical pattern is pages that were created before 2022 or at the very onset of the invasion lay “dormant” for some time and then began to be rapidly filled with content, including posts featuring generated soldiers. Some of these posts immediately – in an almost empty group – received hundreds or even thousands of reactions. This unequivocally indicates artificial audience inflation through large numbers of bots and the boosting of views and likes.

The titles of pages and groups that use AI images of Ukrainian soldiers may change, so we record them as of the time of writing. The study is also complicated by the fact that Facebook allows different communities to have identical titles. By their titles, pages and groups can be divided into those that:

a) *do not conceal a religious orientation*; they have titles such as “Praying for peace in Ukraine” (“Молитвою за мир в Україні”), “Orthodox daily prayer” (“Православна щоденна молитва”), “Orthodox prayer” (“Православна молитва”), “Orthodoxy † Power in prayer” (“Православ'я † Сила в молитві”), “The miracle of prayer” (“Чудо молитви”), “Pretty Jesus” (“Милій Ісус”), etc. To this same group we also assign pages and groups with Russian-language titles such as “Road of Faith” (“Дорога веры”), “Thank God for everything” (“Слава Богу за все”), “Closer to God” (“Ближче к Богу”). Despite the Russian titles, they target a Ukrainian audience and are filled with Ukrainian-language content – let us recall that Facebook is banned in Russia;

b) *mimic congratulatory content*; they have titles such as “Birthday greetings” (“Привітання з днем народження”), “Greetings and best wishes” (“Привітання і найкращі побажання”), or even such a haphazard set of keywords as “Best wishes in life greetings” (“Найкращі побажання в житті привітання”), etc.;

c) *offer entertainment content, stories about “stars” and ordinary people, and pop psychology*; they have titles such as “Interesting topics” (“Цікаві теми”), “Interesting to know” (“Цікаво знати”), or, in Russian, “Do you know?” (“Знаєш ли ты”), “Interesting nearby” (“Интересное рядом”). The pages publish content in Ukrainian and Russian – although after Russia's attack the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian pages, groups, and blogs switched to Ukrainian. The use of two languages creates the false impression that Ukrainians do not care which language to use. The subject matter of posts also capriciously mixes Russian and Ukrainian narratives: stories about well-known figures from the once-shared post-Soviet cultural space, “life stories” about love, betrayal, and divorce. AI-generated images of Ukrainian soldiers appear alongside photographs of Russian entertainers, film actors, and others.

The themes of images with Ukrainian AI-soldiers change from time to time, depending on political and social influences. In 2023 and at the beginning of 2024 we recorded the following groups of images: “valiant warrior, defender”; “greetings and prayers” (soldiers asked to be congratulated on their birthday and to be prayed for); “in the trenches” (soldiers in trenches, often in harsh conditions, in snow and rain).

Among them, a separate group stood out with a theme that can be called “Avdiivka asks for prayers” – a specific block of images disseminated during heavy Ukrainian fighting for the city of Avdiivka (autumn 2023 – winter 2024) that created a mood of hopelessness and despair (Poliakova, 2024), see Figures 1-2.

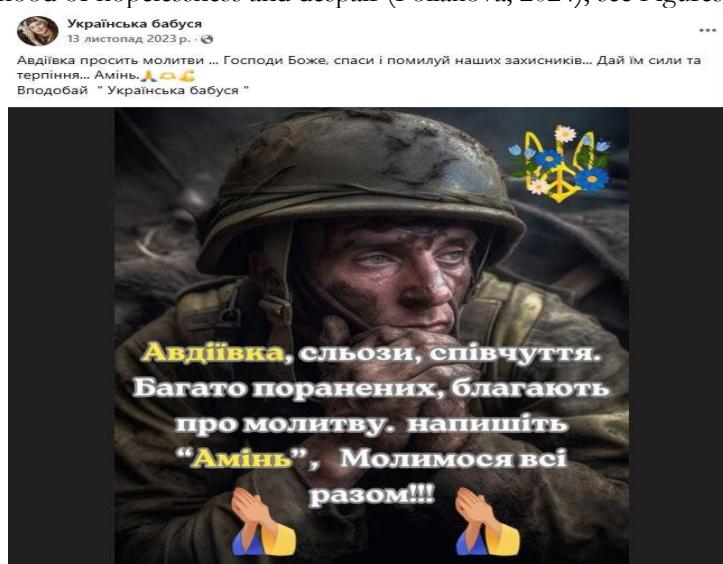


Figure 1. Facebook page “Ukrainian Grandma” (own archive)

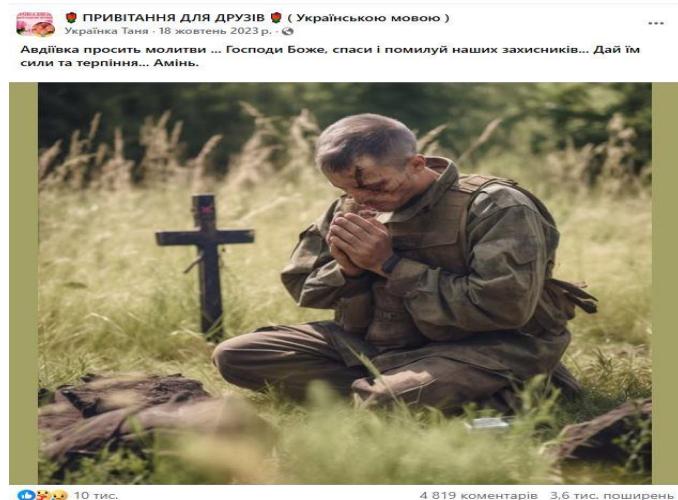


Figure 2. Facebook page “Greetings for friends (in Ukrainian)” (own archive)

It should be noted that this means of influencing the audience was not limited to Avdiivka. Later, during heavy fighting for other cities and regions (Bakhmut, Kherson region, etc.), similar images appeared (Figures 3-4).

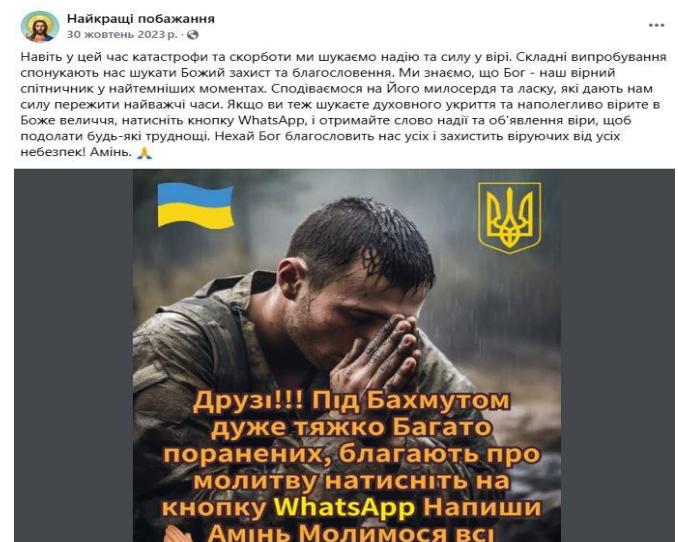


Figure 3. Facebook page “Best Wishes | (own archive)

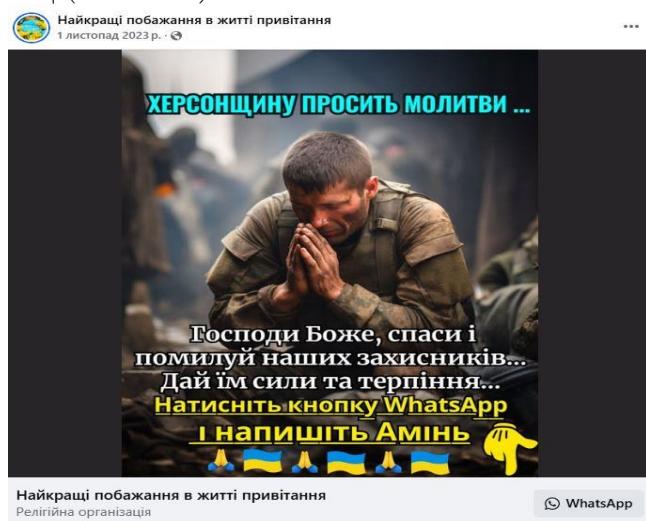


Figure 4. Facebook page “Best wishes in life greetings” (own archive)

Those who generate images for manipulative purposes respond quickly to changes in context. For example, in 2024 new themes appeared: pairs of young servicemembers who had just married and asked to be congratulated; images of soldiers, men and women, with amputated limbs (see Figures 5-6).

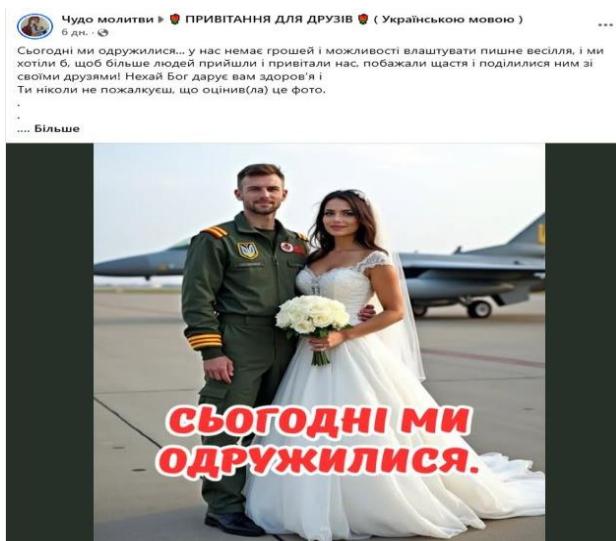


Figure 5. Facebook page “The Miracle of Prayer. Greetings for Friends (in Ukrainian)” (own archive)

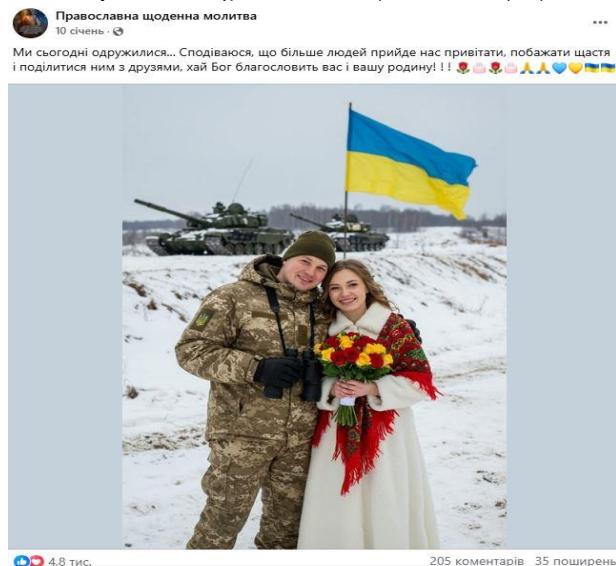


Figure 6. Facebook page “Orthodox Daily Prayer” (own archive)

A new wave of manipulation is linked to the appearance in the Ukrainian public sphere of a significant number of soldiers with amputations – they move in wheelchairs or are learning to use modern limb prostheses. We note that in the images the exposed stumps usually look unnatural, perhaps because AI still cannot depict them realistically due to a shortage of training materials available openly. Also looking comical are images in which wives carry on their backs legless husbands, sons, daughters (see Figures 7-10).

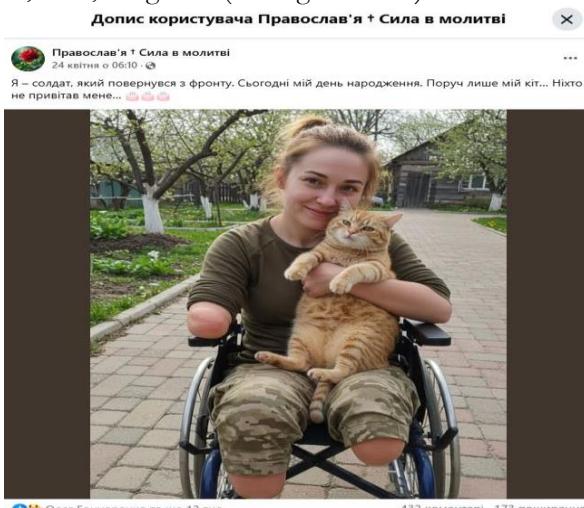


Figure 7. Facebook page “Orthodoxy Power in Prayer” (own archive)



Figure 8. Facebook page “Praying for Peace in Ukraine” (own archive)



Figure 9. Facebook page “Praying for Peace in Ukraine” (own archive)



Figure 10. Facebook pages “Fujian” and “Emery Hamilton” (own archive)

Today AI images seem to encompass all topics relating to Ukrainian wartime realities: being at the front, in hospitals, returning from Russian captivity, severe wounds, the love lives of servicemembers, their family relationships, death and burial, orphaned children. Alongside low-quality images there are very high-quality ones that are hard to distinguish from real photographs (see Figures 11-12).



Figure 11. Facebook page “Kabar Terupdate” (own archive)



Figure 12. Facebook page “Greetings for friends (in Ukrainian)” (own archive)

A recent and particularly concerning development is the emergence of videos in which generated soldiers move and speak. Although these videos remain technically imperfect and their voices sound mechanical, they may nevertheless function as “evidence” of authenticity for non-critical audiences, implying the real existence of the depicted individuals.

The purpose of creating such pages was not clear for some time (although their manipulative nature was obvious), but in 2024 publications appeared that clarified certain issues. A thorough investigation in the summer of 2024 was conducted by the Ukrainian Facebook page “Behind the news”, which consistently combats information manipulations. The analysts found that the pages with religious titles are run by the Chinese Church of Almighty God, which promotes a new faith in the woman-Christ Yang Xiangbin and operates an audience in various regions of the world. The publications contain links to a WhatsApp account, where communication begins with people who invite one to joint prayer. These people have certain legends, they provide some information about themselves (obviously false; at times the conversation resembles a dialogue with a bot) (Behind the news, 2024 July 23; Behind the news, 2024 July 26). The fact that the page administrators are located in different countries can be determined from the page information. For example, the page “Orthodoxy + Power in prayer” is administered from Spain (65), Italy (6), Netherlands (5), Germany (3), Greece (2), Portugal (2), Ukraine (1).

Subsequently, in the fall of 2024, experts from the Institute of Mass Information carried out their own investigation into AI-soldiers on YouTube channels. They also entered into communication with the channel administrators, joined joint prayers, and found that behind similar channels, united into a network, stands the same

Church of Almighty God, which recruits parishioners both in Ukraine and in Russia, that is, a supranational manipulative entity. Pastor Andrii, who figures in both investigations, turned out to be a 24-year-old Ukrainian construction worker (From Orthodoxy to a sect, 2024).

Following the circulation of information about the Chinese church, numerous other manipulative pages came to be associated with religious motives. It should be noted that this type of community is indeed highly prevalent on Facebook, and titles are not necessarily overtly religious. Pages grouped in the second thematic block (e.g., "Birthday greetings" / "Привітання з днем народження") frequently propagate religious narratives and, in orientation, are effectively identical to those in the first block (see Figures 13-14)

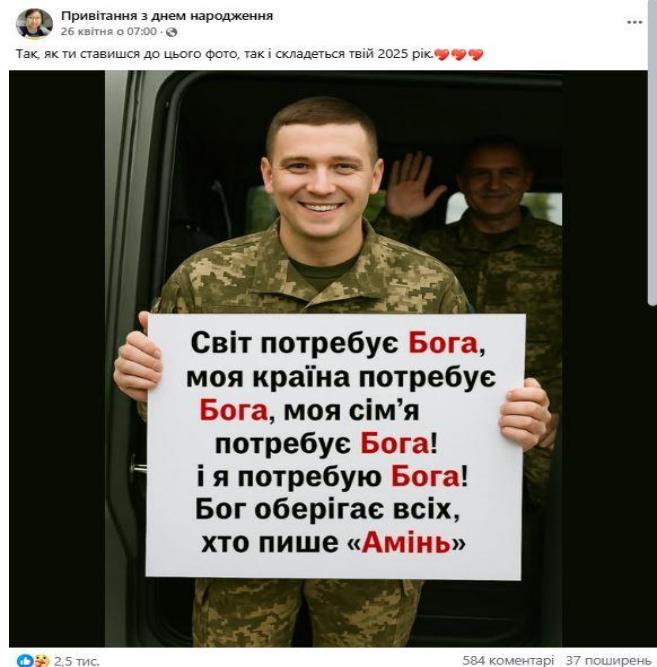


Figure 13. Facebook page "Happy Birthday" (own archive)



Figure 14. Facebook page "Happy Birthday" (own archive)

A characteristic feature of the pages assigned to the third thematic block – with entertainment content, "celebrity" and family stories – is the promise to reveal details in a comment. On all the pages mentioned in this block, we found a mixing of entertainment content and religious themes similar to blocks a, b. However, under photos of soldiers asking one to say "Amen," no religious propaganda is conducted, and commenters are not drawn into prayers. It appears that this is not the page's profile orientation. The link placed in the comment redirects the reader to a poorly made site filled with very low-quality clickbait content. In our opinion, such pages

typologically belong to another group of Facebook communities – created for monetization and other kinds of fraud. We note that pages from this block mostly have administrators located in Armenia.

We also propose including in this block pages that are filled with ostensibly real Ukrainian news but can be marked as fraudulent by certain signs: “hot,” “scary” news; funneling readers to a low-quality, hastily built site; substitution of characters in texts (Cyrillic replaced by Latin letters and digits).

The defined scope of our article – a study of communities that use generated soldiers – does not allow us to devote attention to pages that, for manipulative purposes, broadcast socio-political content without AI images, or with only a minimal number of them. We will only say that pages similar to “Nice Ukraine” (“Файні Україна”), “My Homeland” (“Моя Батьківщина”), “I love my homeland” (“Кохаю свою батьківщину”), “Bomb” (“Бомба”), “5 minutes” (“5 хвилин”), “News from Ukraine and the World” (“Новини України та світу”), “Ukrainian news” (“Українські новини”), “Kyiv.live” (“Київ.live”), “Politics Expert” (“Політика Експерт”), “RE:spublika.UA” (the last three are linked by mutual reposts and similar content) operate according to the same scheme – redirecting readers to low-quality websites. Another characteristic feature is playing on readers’ political preferences, simultaneously provoking supporters of former president Petro Poroshenko and of the incumbent president Volodymyr Zelensky. We note that such pages have far fewer administrators than the religious ones; their administrators are located in Ukraine and Armenia; we also detected Spain and Italy. The page “News from Ukraine and the World” (“Новини України та світу”) has three administrators: two from Vietnam and one from Russia. This “patriotic” page for Ukrainians was created in 2023 as “Trần Hạnh Vi” and was soon renamed.

In general, these two factors – administration (how many people manage the page and where they are located) and page renaming – are diagnostically important. For example, the group “Blessings and greetings” (“ Благословення і вітання ”) was created in 2021 under the title (Rus.) “Alla Pugacheva – The Star!” (“Алла Пугачева-Звезда!”) and was renamed in 2023. R. DiResta and J. A. Goldstein also write those pages often change name and thematic focus (DiResta, Goldstein, 2024).

From pages with manipulative content, ramified structures – “rhizomes” – are formed, whose task is to compel the audience to certain actions: to become adherents of the Chinese church, to waste their nerves on political quarrels, to help fraudsters make money, etc. The joint actions of the pages named are evidently manifestations of so-called Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) – that is, the creation by anonymous actors of networks of pages, groups, and accounts with the aim of deception (political debates, distribution of low-quality goods, etc.) – which Facebook has been purposefully combating since 2017. N. Gleicher, Facebook’s head of cybersecurity policy, explained in 2018 how such networks are found and removed (Gleicher, 2018 December 6). The networks originate in various regions: the USA, the United Kingdom, the Middle East (Iran), Russia. “Today these networks increasingly use sensational political content – regardless of its political orientation – to build audiences and drive traffic to their websites, earning money for each site visitor,” Facebook specialists reported (Gleicher, Rodriguez, 2018). From 2017 to 2020, Facebook removed more than 150 networks in over 50 countries worldwide; Ukraine ranked among the five countries most affected by their activity (Romaniuk, Snopok, 2021). Despite the absence of a precise definition of CIB, we propose to classify as CIB all the above-mentioned means of manipulating social-media audiences.

The alarming dynamics within the Ukrainian online sphere are not unique. The English-language ecosystem has for some time contended with a proliferation of AI-generated imagery, including: depictions of Jesus Christ (“Shrimp Jesus,” for instance, or Jesus surrounded by attractive flight attendants); individuals soliciting assessments of peculiar craft projects; elderly persons celebrating birthdays and asking for congratulations; and European, Asian, and African farmers cultivating gigantic vegetables and fruits in lush fields and gardens. In the Ukrainian sphere, several of these motifs are present and the AI outputs display marked similarities; however, they are frequently inflected with new meanings aligned with developments in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

By way of comparison, children and adolescents with craftworks “that no one praised” are often recast, in the Ukrainian segment, as orphans who purportedly lost a parent at the front and have drawn their portraits or produced sculptures in sand or wood – accompanied by appeals for viewers to comment. Firefighters and police officers pausing to pray during the workday are transformed into Ukrainian soldiers praying at the front line. Group portraits of various professions (e.g., physicians, flight attendants) are reframed as portraits of soldiers. American grandmothers surrounded by “hero” grandchildren become Ukrainian grandmothers welcoming grandchildren home from the front (see Figures 15-22).



Figure 15. Facebook page “Dio ci ama” (own archive)



Figure 16. Facebook pages “Fujian” (own archive)



Figure 17. Facebook pages “God's love is with us” (own archive)



Figure 18. Facebook page “News Ukraine” (own archive)



Figure 19. Facebook page “Dio ci ama” (own archive)



Figure 20. Facebook page “Interesting Topics” (own archive)



Figure 21. Facebook page “Salute to Heroes” (own archive)

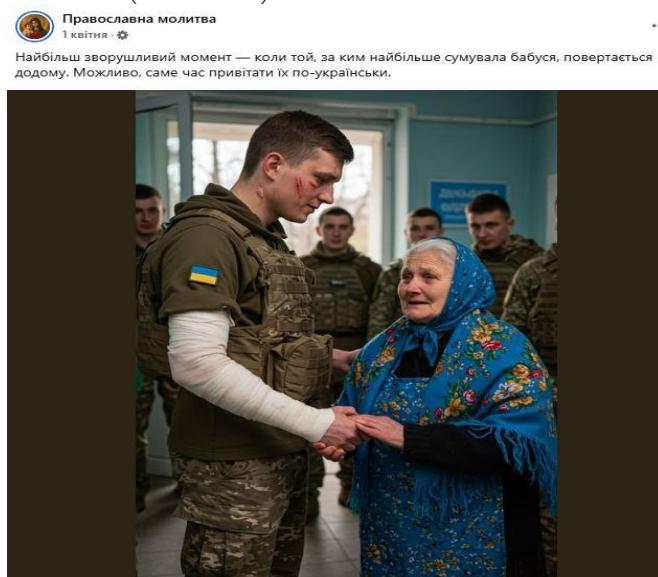


Figure 22. Facebook page “Orthodox Prayer” (own archive)

The defining marker of the current period – as noted above – is the proliferation of amputation-themed depictions of soldiers. While this motif appears (Harrison Dupré, 2024), it seems comparatively uncommon in foreign platform segments; indeed, we identified only a single image of a U.S. soldier, in stark contrast to the vast volume of Ukrainian examples. In both illustrative photographs below, the depicted soldiers solicit birthday congratulations. Notably, the Ukrainian segment frequently exploits a motif of “collective amputations” across siblings, parent-child dyads, or friends (see Figures 23-24).



Figure 23. Facebook page “Love God & God Love You III” (own archive)

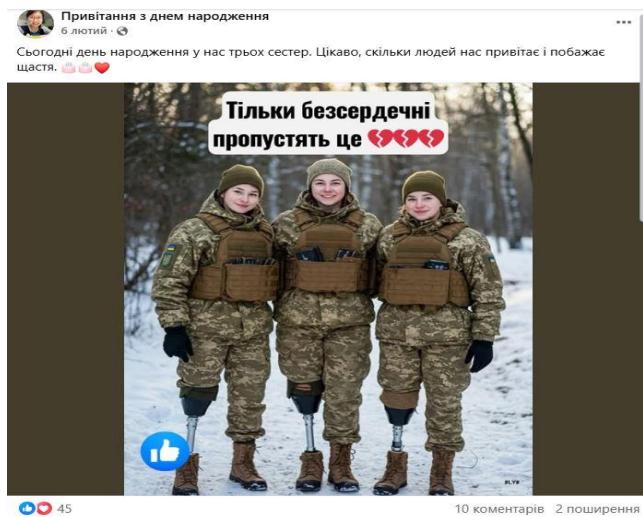


Figure 24. Facebook page “Happy Birthday” (own archive)

Yet there are certain differences in the theatics of AI images. For example, in the Ukrainian segment one does not encounter “horrific” images of AI women breastfeeding infants (Maiberg, 2024); instead, a popular image is that of a young woman-soldier who has returned from the front and given birth. In general, one can say that Ukrainian women soldiers are not sexualized, unlike, for example, the putative European and Asian women soldiers with hypertrophied secondary sexual characteristics on pages with titles like “Beautiful Military.” Nor do we encounter in the Ukrainian segment the aforementioned “Shrimp Jesus,” Jesus made of Coca-Cola bottles, golden Jesus, Jesus with flight attendants, and similar variants; nor are there disseminated deformed, mutilated AI children asking to be congratulated on their birthdays (Koebler, 2024), see Figures 25-26.



Figure 25. Facebook page “Beautiful military Lover” (own archive)

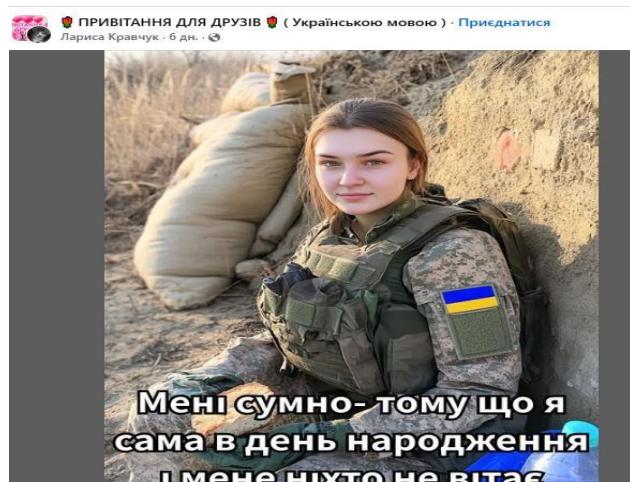


Figure 26. Facebook page “Greetings for friends (in Ukrainian)” (own archive)

A comparative analysis of manipulations targeting different audiences leads us to conclude that the widespread view in Ukraine that the Russian FSB stands behind all such communities requires careful reconsideration. That publications with AI soldiers are part of information manipulation – and that interaction with them (reactions, comments, shares) plays into the hands of the aggressor state – is stated, for example, by the Center for Countering Disinformation, a working body of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine: “Thus the enemy obtains a platform for advancing narratives dangerous to Ukraine” (Center for Countering Disinformation, 2024). Increasingly, under posts using AI one can see comments by concerned Ukrainians such as: “Do not fall for Russian manipulation,” “The FSB stands behind such posts.” One purported proof of Russian interference is the replacement of images sometime after publication – for example, an elderly man is depicted with a call to prayer, while commenters congratulate a young woman on her birthday. It is thought that, having received approving comments from Ukrainians, the “FSB” then substitutes an image corresponding to Russian narratives. We personally did not find examples of posts that directly promote Russian narratives (for instance, that approve the actions of the Russian army, of Putin, etc.), although we did indeed observe image replacements. We do not claim that Russian special services do not intervene in Ukrainian social networks or influence Ukrainian audiences. But with regard to the proposition that Russia’s role in manipulations with AI soldiers is insufficiently proven, we present two arguments:

- Manipulative visual and textual AI content in the Ukrainian segment as a whole is identical to that disseminated to foreign audiences, with certain thematic differences; this compels the thought that similar technologies entered Ukraine from the West and the Asian East (together with The Church of Almighty God), and not from Russia. Otherwise, one would have to acknowledge that Russia totally controls social networks, including Facebook;
- Such content is not widespread in Russian social networks, in particular VKontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki (“Classmates”). At minimum, we did not find mass-generated images of Russian soldiers there; nor do Russian scholars, publicists, and bloggers study such a phenomenon as they do in Ukraine – which, in our view, indicates a lack of interest in such practices on Russia’s part. One VK page that we identified as likely a community of the Chinese church used images of an entirely different character.

Analysts of the “Behind the news” platform claim they observed how, after a post was replaced, it contained a link to a site similar to “Ukralav” (perhaps “ukralove” is meant?) with manipulative content dangerous to Ukraine’s socio-political stability (Malichenko, 2024). Analysts of the Civic Network “Opora” conducted a qualitative investigation in the course of which they discovered how, by following links from Facebook pages with “Ukrainian news,” one can encounter Russian fraudsters (Lorian, 2023).

A separate problem is the hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of approving reactions to the generated content we analyzed. The overwhelming number of commenters look like bots – they have few posts on their pages, or their profiles are closed altogether. We also noticed that the audience of such communities is predominantly middle-aged and older, insofar as this can be determined from photos. Unfortunately, there is no way to understand how many real people are among the commenters, whether these not-young, ordinary women and men from the provinces are actually writing heartfelt comments. Even if their own pages are open and look human, they do not engage in conversation. Jason Koebler, cofounder of 404 Media, encountered the same phenomenon; he unsuccessfully tried to contact three hundred commenters who in one way or another approved of artificial images. His conclusion: the overwhelming majority of commenters are as generated as the posts and images on deceptive pages; also, the profiles of real people may have been hacked and are now being used for manipulations (Koebler, 2024).

Within the Ukrainian segment, under approving comments to AI images, there are increasingly replies like: “Ukrainians! Attention! This image is not real; it was created by a computer (artificial intelligence) on a painful topic for all of us!” (we emphasize: the posters believe they are addressing real people who failed to recognize an AI image). Notably, administrators do not delete such comments. Frequently beneath them – as under approving comments – there appear page replies of the form “May the Heavenly Father bring you blessing and harmony,” which unambiguously indicates automatic bot activity that does not understand the content of the negative comment.

This phenomenon is closely connected with the conspiratorial Dead Internet Theory, which asserts that a significant share of online activity is produced not by people but by artificial accounts and algorithms (Walter, 2025). J. Koebler sharpens the issue and calls this AI space the “zombie internet” (Koebler, 2024). Thanks to generative artificial intelligence, such accounts can instantly create visual and textual content aimed at collecting the maximum number of reactions. If earlier this theory was considered only a hypothesis, today we see its manifestations with our own eyes. The danger is that the boundary between genuine and artificial content is rapidly eroding. Content created by AI is capable of manipulating users’ emotions, influencing their behavior, and shaping

a distorted perception of reality. These are not just pictures – they are instruments of informational influence that undermine trust in the digital sphere and spread disinformation.

It is difficult to detect the scale of the problem. Although researchers can see the number of likes and shares, precise view statistics for individual posts are inaccessible. The only exception is the information about the 20 most popular publications per quarter, which is published by Facebook Transparency's Center. In the second quarter of 2023, this list included an AI image (40 million views, over 1,9 million interactions!) that appeared on a page that had previously been culinary and later turned into a collection of “interiors” generated by a neural network (DiResta, Goldstein, 2024).

The logic of such manipulations is simple: pages that massively publish emotionally charged, “heroic,” or touching content quickly gain reach. People who interact with such posts are subject to emotional influence, which contributes to the page’s growth in popularity. Even a simple interaction with an “innocent” image can become the first step toward being drawn into more complex manipulation schemes. That is why it is important to approach such content critically and not contribute to its dissemination.

Concurrently, it must be borne in mind that the role of human actors in such manipulative ecosystems may be overstated. Scholars frequently assert that a given post garnered thousands of affirmative reactions and misled large swaths of readers; one also encounters despairing claims about audiences’ intellectual deficits and their failure to recognize manipulation. Yet, as noted above, it is effectively impossible to ascertain the proportion of genuine users to bots within these communities.

By publishing, for the purpose of criticism, AI-generated images of Ukrainian soldiers on our own blogs, we noticed that a certain portion of the audience (regardless of age) indeed does not understand that these images are fake. Their sympathetic reactions, for example to AI images of soldiers with amputated limbs, confirmed that they perceive them as real photographs, since they had never encountered this type of manipulation. It has already been established that only 60 percent of ordinary people (non-artists) are able to distinguish which artistic image was created by AI and which by a real artist (Yoo Jeong Ha et al., 2024). No similar sociological experiments have yet been conducted on the material of AI soldiers. According to a survey in Ukraine, people do not associate AI with falsifications, although 15 percent of respondents believe that AI leads to the degradation of the human being (Art or entertainment, 2024).

In Ukraine, during the war, the level of social-media use is increasing. Facebook remains one of the most popular networks for communication, especially for Ukrainians over 30, although among young people it is losing trust (Media consumption by Ukrainians, 2023). It is precisely on Facebook that, despite harsh, inadequate censorship (which prohibits pejorative expressions regarding Russians and restricts publications of sensitive content, including destruction and deceased people), information about Russia’s crimes is actively disseminated. This entire world of human communication may disappear due to the onslaught of generated textual and visual content and constant manipulation. Mark Zuckerberg confirms that at the beginning of 2024 up to 30 percent of posts in the Facebook feed were deliberately generated with the help of AI on the basis of algorithms (Koebler, 2024). The number of unconnected posts – i.e., posts from pages and groups to which a person is not subscribed – shown in the feed is also growing rapidly. As early as the beginning of 2024, Meta declared that it would label AI images on Facebook, Instagram and Threads (Clegg, 2024); however, for now such labeling, though it occurs, is not widespread.

Within this context, the responsibility of the platforms themselves comes to the fore. Companies such as Meta bear both ethical and technical obligations to deploy effective detection and labeling mechanisms for AI-generated content. Their remit should extend beyond technical intermediation to proactive mitigation of disinformation that undermines societal information security. Absent responsible platform governance, the risks of manipulation will intensify – as will public susceptibility to conspiratorial narratives despite ongoing technological advances.

CONCLUSIONS

This article offers the first comparative analysis of AI-mediated manipulation across Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian audiences. The analysis indicates that the Ukrainian social-media sphere – above all Facebook – faces an influx of fabricated AI content comparable to that encountered by both western and eastern publics. Several recurring influence architectures are observable, employed by diverse actors to advance specific aims (e.g., religious recruitment, monetization).

At the same time, the Ukrainian situation has its own specificities, being immersed in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. It is precisely the events of the war that create fertile ground for various types of manipulation. AI images of Ukrainian soldiers, men and women, as well as their families, have become perhaps the most effective instrument of manipulation, since they resonate with Ukrainians’ emotions. Fraudsters work with emotions, relentlessly taking advantage of society’s vulnerabilities. Generated soldiers on many pages and in groups appear

alongside real ones – often the fallen or missing – thus legitimizing them. Fake images distort the real picture – for example, thousands of soldiers with amputations (entire families, brothers and sisters, parents and sons) create the impression that the Ukrainian collective body is maimed. Elderly, exhausted soldiers crying in trenches because no one congratulated them on their birthday allegedly testify to the demoralization of the Ukrainian army.

The spread of AI content exacerbates the lack of critical thinking. Such content is only one variety of manipulation; overall, Ukraine suffers from information fakes, a significant portion of which do indeed originate in Russia. Despite the efforts of certain organizations, internet platforms, blogs, and individual enthusiasts, the broader public still lacks critical-thinking skills. It is necessary to learn to distinguish ever-higher-quality AI images from real ones. Military uniforms often do not conform to Ukrainian standards; there are errors in texts within the image itself (signage, labels, etc.). Publication texts also often contain gross mistakes and sometimes do not correspond to the image at all. In addition, content on manipulative pages is periodically recycled, which can be detected by viewing all images in the archive.

The deluge of AI-generated content on social platforms, particularly Facebook, and the algorithmic systems that shape audience exposure raise uncomfortable questions for Meta. The company appears to have become a principal driver of a “Dead Internet”: a virtual environment saturated with automated accounts, thereby eroding the very premise of social networking as a space for human connection.

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