

ПЕТРО КАТЕРИНИЧ

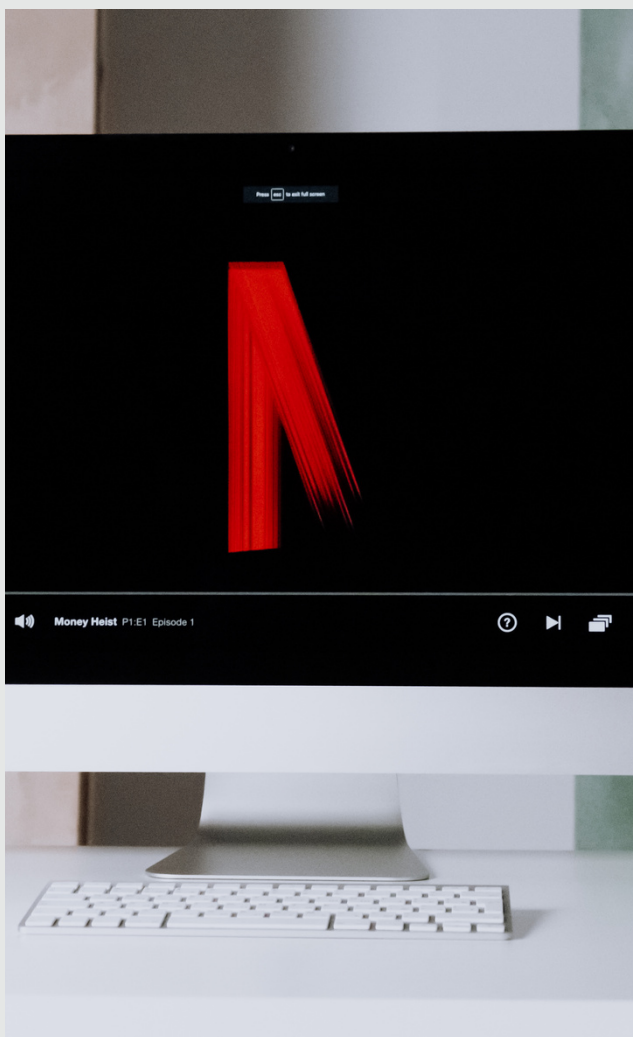
# ЦИФРОВИЙ ЕСКАПІЗМ: ЯК ВІЙНА ВПЛИВАЄ НА СТІМІНГОВУ ПОВЕДІНКУ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ МОЛОДІ

## DIGITAL ESCAPISM: HOW WAR INFLUENCES ONLINE STREAMING HABITS AMONG UKRAINIAN YOUTH



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Це дослідження спрямоване на вивчення взаємозв'язку між умовами воєнного часу та стрімінговою поведінкою серед української молоді, зосереджуючись на взаємодії з платформою Netflix. Опитування 400 студентів з Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка (n=100), Львівського національного університету імені Івана Франка (n=100), Харківського національного університету імені В. Н. Каразіна (n=100) та Одеського національного університету імені І. І. Мечникова (n=100) виявило, що стрімінгові платформи відіграють значну роль у формуванні цінностей, світогляду та політичних поглядів респондентів. Більшість студентів повідомили про збільшення споживання стрімінгових платформ у воєнний час порівняно з мирним, що підкреслює важливість цифрового ескапізму як механізму копінг-стратегій, спрямованих на подолання стресу. Крім того, учасники надають значну перевагу контенту, пов'язаному з українським контекстом у воєнний час, що підкреслює необхідність культурної репрезентації в медіаспоживанні. Це дослідження проливає світло на комплікований імплікативний взаємозв'язок між цифровим ескапізмом, впливом медіа та громадським залученням у складний період.

**Ключові слова:** цифровий ескапізм, стрімінгові платформи, Netflix, українська молодь, російсько-українська війна, механізми подолання, медіаспоживання

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This study investigated the relationship between wartime conditions and online streaming habits among Ukrainian youth, focusing on their engagement with the Netflix platform. Survey of 400 students from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (n=100), Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (n=100), V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (n=100) and Odessa I. I. Mechnikov National University (n=100) revealed that streaming platforms played a significant role in shaping respondents' values, attitudes, and political perspectives. Most students reported increased media consumption during wartime compared with peacetime, highlighting the importance of digital escapism as a coping mechanism. Furthermore, participants expressed a strong preference for content relevant to the Ukrainian context during wartime, emphasizing the need for cultural representation in media consumption. This study sheds light on the complex interplay between digital escapism, media influence, and community engagement in challenging circumstances.

**Keywords:** digital escapism, streaming platforms, Netflix, Ukrainian youth, Russia-Ukraine war, coping mechanisms, media consumption



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# DIGITAL ESCAPISM: HOW WAR INFLUENCES ONLINE STREAMING HABITS AMONG UKRAINIAN YOUTH

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## Introduction

In an era of rapid technological advancement, streaming platforms such as Netflix have emerged as a dominant force in media consumption (Katerynych, Goian V., Goian O. 2023:1-2). This cultural shift has had a profound impact on the lives of young people, who now embrace digital escapism as a means of navigating the complexities of their world. This phenomenon takes on a unique dimension in the context of war, as Ukrainian youth grapple with the harsh realities of conflict while seeking solace in the virtual realm.

In this article, we delve into the relationship between streaming platforms and wartime experiences of Ukrainian youth. By examining the results of a survey conducted among a diverse group of students, consisting of 100 participants from each of the following four Ukrainian universities: Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, representing the central region; Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, representing the western region; V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, representing the eastern region; and Odessa I.I.Mechnikov National University, representing the southern region, we explore how digital escapism shapes their values, attitudes, and coping mechanisms in times of crisis. These students come from a wide range of fields of study and offer a comprehensive perspective on the impact of streaming platforms during wartime.

The aim of this research is to investigate the impact of the war on the online viewing habits of young people in Ukraine, with a particular focus on their use of platforms such as Netflix. Additionally, we seek to examine the role of digital escapism in shaping their coping mechanisms, overall well-being, and political attitudes during the war. To achieve this goal, we have formulated the following research questions:

*RQ1. How has wartime influenced the media consumption habits of Ukrainian youth, particularly in relation to streaming platforms like Netflix?*

*RQ2. Does digital escapism through streaming platforms help Ukrainian youth cope with the stress and challenges associated with wartime?*

*RQ3. To what extent do streaming platforms shape the political opinions and perspectives of Ukrainian youth during wartime?*

## Impacts and coping mechanisms: Ukrainian youth in the face of war

In the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the nation's youth have faced significant psychological strain, with widespread reports of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness (Chudzicka-Czupała et al. 2023: 5-7; Xu et al. 2023: 960-962). Despite these challenges, Ukrainian young people have demonstrated remarkable resilience and a sustained commitment to their education (Lunov et al. 2022: 443), embodying the essence of resilience as defined by Masten and Narayan (2012: 231) – the ability to adapt and bounce back in the face of adversity.

This resilience is crucial as they navigate the compounded stresses imposed by the war (Bagdžiūnienė et al. 2022: 11). The literature suggests that resilience in youth affected by conflict can be bolstered through targeted interventions aimed at improving coping skills (Betancourt, Khan 2008; Timmer et al. 2022). Such interventions are vital, as the impact of war stress is multifaceted, influencing not only the psychological but also the neurobiological well-being of individuals, with Ukrainian refugees showing significant neurobiological changes as a result of war stress (Rektor et al. 2023: 18).

Surveys reflect the war's profound effect on the youth. The 'How to Talk about War in the Language of Culture' Survey (2021) highlighted that 61.4% are drawn to media detailing life amid Donbas and Crimea events. The 'Relevance of Cultural Issues for Young People' study (2023) found war-related disruptions leading 57% of respondents to reduce cultural event participation, primarily due to mental health strains.



The 2023 'Emotional and Psychological Condition of Ukrainians' survey indicated a middling self-assessment of emotional state, with younger age groups more susceptible to depression, exhaustion, and sleep disruptions, often resorting to movies and online platforms as stress-relief measures.

Another survey, the U-Report (2022), post the February 24 invasion, conveyed a sizable 69% noting emotional well-being deterioration, with many expressing a desire for psychological support, yet a smaller fraction actually seeking it. The 'Teenagers and Wartime Life' survey (2023) acknowledged the significance of physical interaction, such as touch and hugs, in combating negative emotions, while also highlighting digital escapism as a common coping strategy for nearly a quarter of the surveyed adolescents.

The research conducted by Kurapov et al. (2023) revealed that a substantial 97.8% of Ukrainian university students and staff surveyed experienced worsened psycho-emotional states as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war. This highlights the profound psychological impact of war on individuals, particularly within academic circles. It underscores the need for appropriate mental health support and interventions in such contexts.

Lopatovska et al. (2022) conducted a thematic analysis of interviews with 27 Ukrainian adolescents, uncovering trauma and resilience in response to the Russia-Ukraine war, with a focus on the role of family, community, and information technology in coping strategies. The study highlights adolescents' recommendations for enhancing information platforms to improve accessibility and cultural relevance for Ukrainian users.

Netflix champions diversity by crafting narratives that resonate locally and appeal globally, an approach integral to its Inclusion Strategy which extends beyond content to encompass workforce diversity (Khoo 2023). This strategy mirrors the evolving media consumption trends where audiences seek diverse and authentic representations. Consequently, Netflix has become a cornerstone of youth culture, fostering social connections and offering cultural capital (Matrix 2014: 124).

In the broader context, digital escapism via platforms like Netflix offers relief, with binge-watching being a relaxation medium (Halfmann, Reinecke 2021; Castro et al. 2021). The immersive experience these platforms provide extends into 'hyperdiegesis', allowing for expansive imaginative engagement (Hills 2002).

## **Methodology**

The study targeted 1st-4th year students from four Ukrainian universities, namely Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (total students 24,828), Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (total students 18,187), V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (total students 17,368), and Odessa I.I.Mechnikov National University (total students 5,315). The questionnaire was shared via official student social media groups on Telegram and Facebook, with the prerequisite that participants should be interested in modern streaming culture and have a subscription to Netflix.

The survey was conducted between May 1 and June 1, 2023. The survey targeted a diverse group of 1st-4th year undergraduate students from four Ukrainian universities. The students surveyed represented a wide range of majors, including computer science (n=50), cultural studies (n=50), journalism (n=50), economics (n=50), literature (n=50), psychology (n=50), international relations (n=50), and biology (n=50). Each of these majors was represented at each of the surveyed universities, ensuring representativeness in terms of regional preferences. All 400 students surveyed were in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. After Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, 327 students remained in Ukraine, while the remaining 73 students sought refuge in other countries or relocated within different countries: 38 to Poland, 10 to Germany, 6 to Romania, 5 to Latvia, and 2 each to Lithuania, France, Moldova, the Netherlands, Denmark, the Czech Republic, and Canada.

The gender distribution of the participants was reflective of each university's student body composition. Among the 400 participants surveyed, 250 were female (62.5%) and 150 were male (37.5%). Among the surveyed students, 140 (35%) were hailed from Central Ukraine, 120 (30%) from Western Ukraine, 80 (20%) from Southern Ukraine, and 60 (15%) from Eastern Ukraine.

Of the 400 respondents, 300 (75%) reported having been using streaming platforms such as Netflix for more than two years. The majority of students surveyed (361 out of 400) confirmed their intention to retain their Netflix subscriptions after Netflix took a pro-Ukrainian stance by withdrawing from the Russian market. In the wake of Moscow's aggression in Ukraine, which began on February 24, a number of international companies, including Netflix, have either suspended operations or opted to pull out of Russia.

Despite being a relatively small player in the Russian market, Netflix is a global streaming pioneer with a subscriber base of 221.8 million by the end of 2021. In an April 2022 shareholder letter, Netflix revealed a loss of 700,000 paid subscribers following its exit from Russia. As a result, new sign-ups from Russia were no longer possible (Russians lose Netflix 2022).

The age distribution of the participants ranged from 17 to 21 years. Specifically, there were 20 participants (5%) aged 17, 100 participants (25%) aged 18, 140 participants (35%) aged 19, 80 participants (20%) aged 20, and 60 participants (15%) aged 21 years.

The questionnaire consisted of an introductory section and a nine-question Likert scale section. The introductory part collected demographic information and participant preferences related to streaming platforms. The Likert scale section included statements that respondents rated on a scale from 'Strongly Disagree' (1) to 'Strongly Agree' (5). The questionnaire was developed using the Google Survey platform and distributed to the students through a unique link. The responses were automatically processed, and each participant could answer only once. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the responses to each Likert scale question.

Statements (n=9) offered to students (n=400) were rated on a Likert scale: Online streaming platforms are popular among my peers (STMT 1); Wartime has influenced the way I engage with media and streaming platforms (STMT 2); The content available on Netflix or similar platforms helped me cope with the stress of wartime (STMT 3); I believe that digital escapism through streaming platforms has played a significant role in shaping the values and attitudes of my generation (STMT 4); The media I consume on streaming platforms influences my political opinions and perspectives on the war (STMT 5); I often discuss the content I watch on Netflix or similar platforms with my friends and family members (STMT 6); My consumption of media content during wartime has increased compared to peacetime (STMT 7); I believe that streaming platforms such as Netflix should prioritize content that is relevant to the Ukrainian context during wartime (STMT 8); Digital escapism through streaming platforms has had a positive impact on my overall well-being during wartime (STMT 9).

### **Influence of war on streaming and coping strategies among Ukrainian youth**

The survey results indicate a significant impact of wartime on the media engagement of Ukrainian youth. A majority of respondents (360 out of 400) reported that wartime had noticeably influenced their media consumption, with 316 out of 400 respondents indicating an increase in media consumption during wartime compared to peacetime. Furthermore, a significant majority (338 out of 400) believed that streaming platforms, including Netflix, should prioritize content relevant to the Ukrainian context during wartime (RQ1).

Respondents also affirmed the positive impact of streaming platforms on their emotional and mental well-being during times of conflict. A substantial number (314 out of 400) agreed that content on platforms like Netflix helped them cope with the stress of ongoing conflict. Similarly, 312 out of 400 respondents felt that digital escapism through streaming platforms positively affected their overall well-being during the war (RQ2).

Streaming platforms also wield significant influence over the political opinions and perspectives of Ukrainian youth during periods of conflict. The majority (334 out of 400) agreed that the media consumed on these platforms shaped their political views and perspectives on the war (RQ3).

The survey also confirmed the prevalence of online streaming platforms within peer groups, with 87% of participants acknowledging their popularity. It further highlighted the influence of the ongoing conflict on media engagement, as 90% of respondents reported alterations in their media consumption habits. Additionally, 78.5% agreed that content offered by platforms like Netflix served as an effective means of coping with the stress associated with ongoing conflict.

Notably, streaming content played a significant role in shaping generational values and attitudes, as 83% of participants acknowledged the role of digital escapism via streaming platforms in this regard. Moreover, 76.5% of participants reported a tendency to discuss the content they consume on platforms such as Netflix with peers and family members. These findings underscore the significant role of streaming platforms in the lives of Ukrainian youth during wartime.

*Regional Differences in Responses*

Participants from Central Ukraine (n=140) exhibited a slightly higher inclination (strongly agree – 40%) towards strong agreement regarding the significant role of digital escapism via streaming platforms in shaping generational values and attitudes, compared to participants from other regions. Conversely, those from Western Ukraine (n=120) displayed a more divided perspective, with 10% expressing disagreement or strong disagreement with the idea of digital escapism's influence on values. Participants from Eastern Ukraine (n=60) demonstrated the highest level of strong agreement (50%) with the notion that the war influenced their engagement with media and streaming platforms, likely attributable to their proximity to the conflict's effects.

*Gender-Based Differences in Coping Mechanisms*

Regarding gender disparities, female participants were more likely to strongly agree (45%) that content available on platforms like Netflix helped them cope with the stress of war, whereas male participants exhibited a more even distribution between the agree and strongly agree categories.

*Differences in Responses Based on Streaming Service Usage*

Participants with more than two years of experience using streaming platforms, such as Netflix, expressed a stronger conviction (strongly agree, 50%) that the media they consume on these platforms influences their political opinions and perspectives on the war. Conversely, those new to streaming held a more neutral stance, suggesting that prolonged exposure to streaming content may have a more pronounced impact on shaping their political views.

*Impact of Military Actions on Streaming Habits*

The impact of military actions was evident in participants' streaming service usage. Those who remained in Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian war indicated increased consumption of media content during wartime compared to peacetime (45% strongly agree). This contrasted with participants who sought refuge in other countries or relocated within different countries, where a smaller percentage (30% strongly agree) agreed with the statement.

*Differences Based on Years of Study and Curriculum*

As students progressed in their studies, agreement that discussing content from platforms like Netflix with friends and family is common increased (52% strongly agree). This suggests that with greater exposure to diverse topics and deeper discussions, students become more inclined to share their streaming experiences.

*Differing Perspectives Among Academic Majors*

Participants from various academic majors exhibited varying perspectives on the prioritization of contextually relevant content during wartime. Students in international relations (60%) and journalism (55%) majors displayed higher agreement levels, reflecting their keen interest in understanding and disseminating information related to ongoing conflicts. Conversely, participants from computer science (30%) and psychology (25%) majors showed lower agreement, possibly indicating a preference for escapism over contextual relevance.

*Impact of Military Action on Students in Certain Majors*

The impact of military action was particularly pronounced in the responses of students majoring in international relations, journalism, and cultural studies, with 60%, 55%, and 50%, respectively, strongly agreeing that streaming platforms should prioritize contextually relevant content during wartime.

*Mean score*

Statement 1 received a mean score of 3.69, indicating a moderate level of agreement. Statement 2 had the highest mean score of 4.04, suggesting strong agreement. Statement 3 received a mean score of 3.77, reflecting a moderate level of agreement. Statement 4 had a mean score of 3.87, indicating a moderate to strong agreement. Statement 5 received a mean score of 3.92, suggesting a moderate to strong agreement. Statement 6 had a mean score of 3.73, reflecting a moderate level of agreement. Statement 7 received a mean score of 3.77, indicating a moderate level of agreement. Statement 8 had a mean score of 4.03, suggesting strong agreement. Statement 9 received a mean score of 3.82, indicating a moderate to strong agreement.

Internal consistency and Correlation Analyses

To ensure the internal consistency of the survey questions and establish the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha (or tau-equivalent reliability) coefficient was calculated for all survey questions. The high tau-equivalent reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.780$ ) confirmed the reliability of the chosen survey instrument.

Correlation analyses were conducted to explore potential relationships between demographic variables and survey responses. Noteworthy correlations include a positive relationship between prolonged streaming platform usage and the belief that media consumption influences political opinions ( $r = 0.51, p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, a positive correlation was found between discussing streamed content with peers and family and being in a higher academic year ( $r = 0.42, p < 0.001$ ).

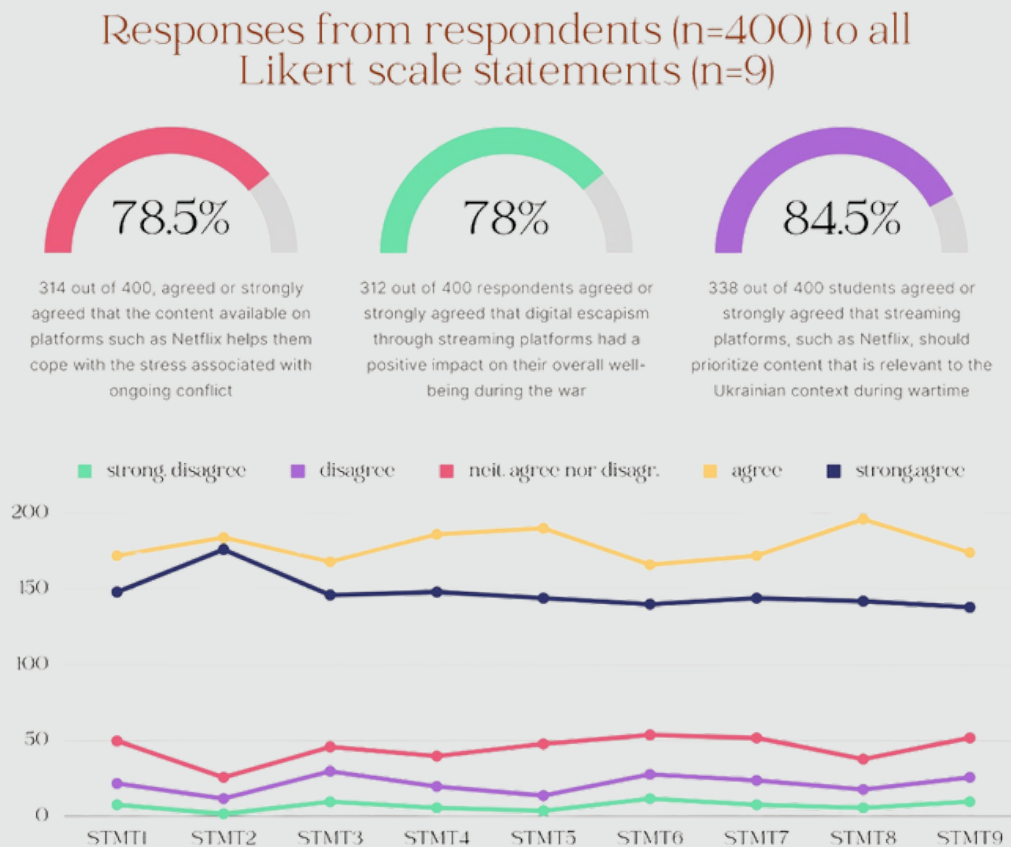
Responses from respondents ( $n=400$ ) to all Likert scale statements (STMT,  $n=9$ ) are shown in **Fig. 1**. All statements were rated on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5)).

Conclusion

The study's findings highlight the significant role of digital media, particularly streaming platforms like Netflix, in the lives of Ukrainian youth during wartime. These platforms serve not only as a means of digital escapism, helping young individuals navigate the stress and challenges associated with wartime, but also shape their political opinions and perspectives. The majority of the students surveyed believe that these platforms should prioritize content relevant to the Ukrainian context during wartime, emphasizing the importance of cultural representation and relevance in media consumption amid conflict.

The study underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between digital media, cultural phenomena, and the realities faced by youth in conflict-ridden contexts. It also calls for streaming platforms to recognize their potential role in supporting young audiences during crises by offering relevant content and fostering discussions on critical issues. This could contribute to the resilience and well-being of young individuals facing unprecedented challenges in today's world.

**Fig. 1. Responses from respondents (n=400) to all Likert scale statements (n=9)**





Future research could include longitudinal studies, comparative analyses, and qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews or focus group discussions. These could deepen our understanding of the complex interaction between digital media, cultural phenomena, and the lived experiences of young individuals in diverse cultural and geopolitical settings affected by conflict or other crises. The trends identified in this study lay the groundwork for further investigations with potentially larger and more diverse cohorts. However, caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings to all Ukrainian youth or students universally.

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