

A computational analysis of emotionally manipulative content in media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war

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Abstract. This paper comprehensively examines emotional patterns and manipulative tactics in English-language digital news coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. The research examines the use of emotions across English-language media outlets, explaining their rhetorical functions and their potential for ideological influence. Using a purpose-built corpus of 488 full-length news articles published between February 2022 and early 2025, we utilise the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model, fine-tuned for effective classification. This model assigns Ekman's (1992) six basic emotions (anger, disgust, fear, enjoyment, sadness, surprise), plus a neutral class, and enables analysis of their distribution across 14 thematic categories and four media domains: the US, the UK, the EU, and global. We investigate the relationship between dominant emotions and 18 manually coded emotionally manipulative tactics. The main findings of the research indicate that negative emotions, most notably fear and anger, predominate in the corpus, functioning as discursive tools for mobilisation, blame, and perception shaping. Sadness and disgust are primarily associated with humanitarian reporting, while enjoyment and surprise remain marginal. Although neutral tone is less emotionally charged, it plays a rhetorical role in diplomatic and strategic reporting, framing neutrality as a deliberate perspective rather than emotional engagement. The research reveals that emotionally manipulative tactics, such as fear-based mobilisation, emphasis on the scale of tragedy, and victim-aggressor contrast, are widely employed across all media outlets, yet differ in frequency and function depending on media origin. The findings obtained emphasise the pivotal role of emotional framing in shaping audience engagement and moral alignment. This paper deepens understanding of digital war reporting, offering insights into how automated emotion detection, alongside discourse analysis, can expose the latent ideological functions of emotion in English-language news coverage. The study contributes to media discourse analysis and highlights the methodological value of computational methods in detecting emotional manipulation in news coverage.

Keywords: natural language processing, transformer-based models, emotion detection, emotionally manipulative tactics, media discourse, Russia-Ukraine war coverage.

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Овсянко Олена, Прокопенко Антоніна, Зінченко Анна. Комп'ютерний аналіз емоційно маніпулятивного контенту у висвітленні російсько-української війни в медіа.

Анотація. У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз емоційних патернів та маніпулятивних тактик в англомовному цифровому висвітленні російсько-української війни в медіа. Дослідження спрямоване на вивчення використання емоцій у публікаціях англомовних медіа з метою пояснення їхньої риторичної функції та потенціалу ідеологічного впливу. На основі спеціально створеного корпусу з 488 повнотекстових статей новин, опублікованих у період з лютого 2022 р. до початку 2025 р., застосовано Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model для здійснення ефективної класифікації. Модель визначає шість базових емоцій за класифікацією Екмана (1992) (злість, відроза, страх, радість, смуток, здивування), а також нейтральний клас, що дало змогу проаналізувати їхній розподіл у межах 14 тематичних категорій і чотирьох регіональних медіадоменів: США, Великої Британії, ЄС та глобального. Досліджується взаємозв'язок між домінантними емоціями та 18 вручну закодованими емоційно-маніпулятивними тактиками. Основні результати свідчать, що негативні емоції, насамперед страх і злість, переважають у корпусі, виконуючи дискурсивну функцію мобілізації, звинувачення та формування сприйняття. Емоції смутку й відроза найчастіше асоціюються з висвітленням гуманітарних питань, тоді як радість і здивування залишаються маргінальними. Хоча нейтральний тон має нижчий емоційний заряд, він виконує риторичну функцію в дипломатичних і стратегічних повідомленнях, подаючи нейтральність як свідомо обрану позицію, а не відсутність емоційної залученості. Результати дослідження демонструють широке використання емоційно-маніпулятивних тактик, зокрема мобілізації через відчуття страху, акценту на масштабі трагедії та протиставлення жертви й агресора у всіх типах медіа, однак із відмінностями у частотності та функції залежно від країни походження видання. Отримані дані підкреслюють ключову роль емоційного фреймінгу для формування залученості аудиторії та її морального позиціонування. Дослідження поглиблює розуміння специфіки цифрового висвітлення війни, пропонуючи аналітичні висновки щодо того, як автоматичне розпізнавання емоцій у поєднанні з дискурс-аналізом дозволяє виявляти приховані ідеологічні функції емоцій в англомовному медіадискурсі. Робота відображає внесок у розвиток аналізу медіадискурсу та підкреслює методологічну значущість комп'ютерних підходів у виявленні маніпуляцій за допомогою емоцій в текстах новин.

Ключові слова: обробка природної мови, моделі на основі трансформерів, розпізнавання емоцій, емоційно-маніпулятивні тактики, медіадискурс, висвітлення російсько-української війни.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become an unprecedented war in the modern world, being the most media-covered warfare in modern history, as people want to be informed about conflicts involving nuclear-armed countries (Malecki, 2023). As digitalisation and social media enable the immediate spread of war-sensitive information, influencing the audience through passive news consumption has also become a battlefield for interpretation.

The rise of digital media has shifted war representation from ‘mediation’ to ‘mediatisation’: mediation refers to communication through a medium in a specific context, while mediatisation is the long-term process by which media reshape social institutions (Hjarvard, 2008). Public perceptions are crucial to war, and the media create, sustain, or challenge them primarily through emotions.

The pivotal role of emotions in media communication is widely recognised (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013); however, research into the manipulation of audience emotions has only recently gained momentum (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). Studies have addressed emotional arousal and engagement (Baum & Abdel Rahman, 2020), emotional framing and its effect on public perception (Kühne & Schemer, 2015), and the manipulative potential of emotion-laden language in conflict reporting and propaganda (Wodak, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2006; Kraidy, 2009; Matseliukh, 2024).

The growing need for investigation of the media’s programming audience engagement via emotional transmission (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) has driven the use of automated analytical methods. Traditional manual analysis can no longer capture emotional dynamics, giving rise to automated approaches such as NLP-based emotion detection (Shelke et al., 2022; Rozado et al., 2022). Given the scale and complexity of the Russia-Ukraine war, such computational tools enable top-level insight into emotional variation across large datasets.

Emotion analysis in text is a complex NLP task distinct from sentiment analysis, which identifies polarity (positive/negative/neutral). Emotion detection, by contrast, recognises discrete emotions such as anger, sadness, or joy. This complexity arises from subjective labelling and different emotion taxonomies (e.g., Ekman, Plutchik) and the subjectivity of labelling. Key benchmarks include SemEval-2007 (Strapparava & Mihalcea, 2007) and SemEval-2018 (Mohammad, 2018), while deep-learning methods like CNN-BiLSTM and BERT-like models enabled scalable, multilingual emotion analysis (Acheampong et al., 2020; 2021).

The present study examines how English-language news articles covering the Russia-Ukraine war, utilise emotions, and how this emotional charge contributes to implementing manipulative tactics shaping audience perception. The research identifies emotional patterns in war-related media coverage and explores their strategic use in affecting the audience.

The study’s novelty lies in applying a transformer-based model for detecting patterns of emotional manipulation in international news discourse. Unlike traditional approaches focusing on either emotion or bias separately, this study integrates advanced NLP tools with quantitative and comparative methods to trace how emotional tone operates as a mechanism for ideological influence. Transformer architecture enables large-scale comparative analysis,

offering new insights into how digital media emotionally frames global conflicts, reinforces political agendas or influences international public opinion.

Theoretical Background

Emotions in Media and Psycholinguistics of Manipulation

Emotions permeate contemporary media discourse, shaping information framing, perception, and often serving as tools of persuasion and control. In recent decades, the connection between emotions and manipulation has become a prominent area of scholarly interest, with much of the literature focusing on how language is strategically used to influence the audience, particularly during times of international crises and war (Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2015; Charteris-Black, 2005).

Emotions are multidimensional mechanisms shaping human perception, judgment, and behaviour, encompassing physiological arousal, cognitive appraisal, expressive behaviour, and social function, serving as a mechanism through which individuals process stimuli, assign value, and respond to environmental demands. In media discourse, emotions are an internal psychological state and an externally exploitable tool for shaping perception, guiding behaviour, and reinforcing ideological narratives (Van Dijk, 2006). Emotional language from a psycholinguistic viewpoint has been shown to improve memory retention (Kensinger & Schacter, 2006) and foster in-group cohesion, increasing perceived relevance of the message.

In this context, emotional manipulation emerges as a strategic communicative method to influence mental representations and behavioural dispositions. Van Dijk (2006) conceptualises manipulation as discursive control over recipients' mental models, where media actors influence knowledge, beliefs, and emotions to shape public opinion. Following his framework, we consider the triangulated approach to manipulation, which highlights that "manipulation is a social phenomenon – as it involves interaction and power abuse between groups and social actors – a cognitive phenomenon, since it targets the mental representations of participants, and a discursive-semiotic phenomenon, as it is carried out through language, discourse, and visual messages" (p. 361). As Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) notes, emotions in journalism are intentionally embedded to enhance engagement and resonance. Similarly, Soroka and McAdams (2015) demonstrate that negative content elicits stronger physiological reactions, explaining media's focus on emotionally charged narratives (p. 16).

Beyond isolated effects, emotions act as latent rhetoric, subtly shaping how messages are processed and acted upon. Specific emotional appeals yield

predictable audience responses: anger tends to facilitate mobilisation and calls to action (Valentino et al., 2011); sadness induces empathy and charitable tendencies (Eisenberg et al., 1994); fear, in turn, heightens anxiety and compliance, often in support of securitising discourses (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Thus, the media exploit this emotional palette through tactics such as omission, exaggeration, emotional focusing, and dramatization, which amplify affective salience and suppress critical distance (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Additionally, selective fact presentation and event dramatisation produce visceral reactions while suppressing critical distance, further entrenching affective interpretations (Entman, 2007; Waisbord, 2020).

In war reporting, such dynamics manifest through emotional binaries – victim vs aggressor, trauma vs heroism – simplifying geopolitical complexities and fostering moral alignment (Kraidy, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2021). Recognising these emotional dynamics is essential for critically evaluating media texts in conflict contexts, as analysis of emotional vocabulary and affective tone helps identify manipulative tactics shaping public perception.

An Overview of Automated Emotion Detection Tools

This section outlines the main approaches to automated emotion detection in text, starting from early lexicon-based methods to contemporary transformer-based models. Emotion detection from the standpoint of computational linguistics is identifying discrete emotions expressed in text. Early lexicon-based approaches, such as WordNet-Affect (Strapparava & Valitutti, 2004), EmoLex (Mohammad & Turney, 2010), and Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC-22) (Boyd et al., 2022), linked individual terms to specific emotional categories but were limited in contextual accuracy. Later, deep learning algorithms, including Convolutional Neural Network (CNN), Recurrent Neural Network (RNN), Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM), and Gated Recurrent Unit (GRU), became more influential as they could extract emotions or sentiments from text streams without feature engineering (Chutia & Baruah, 2024).

However, recent advances in natural language processing have been dominated by transformer-based models, which have revolutionised various NLP tasks, including emotion detection. Vaswani et al. (2017) introduced the Transformer as a novel network architecture based solely on attention mechanisms, dispensing with recurrence and convolutions entirely. Unlike previous encoder-decoder models based on recurrence or convolution, the Transformer achieved superior performance, offered greater parallelisability, and required significantly less training time.

Devlin et al. (2018) introduced a new language representation model called BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers). BERT is designed to pretrain deep bidirectional representations from unlabelled text by jointly conditioning on both left and right context in all layers. As a result, the pre-trained BERT model can be fine-tuned with one additional output layer to create state-of-the-art models for a wide range of tasks, such as question answering and language inference, without substantial task-specific architecture modifications.

Liu et al. (2019) presented a replication study of BERT pretraining and proposed an improved recipe for training BERT models, which they called RoBERTa, that could match or exceed the performance of all post-BERT methods. Their modifications are simple and include training the model for a longer period, with bigger batches and more data; removing the next sentence prediction objective; training on longer sequences; dynamically changing the masking pattern applied to the training data. They also collected a large new dataset (CC-NEWS) of comparable size to other privately used datasets.

This study uses the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model developed by J. Hartmann (2022) to detect emotions in a corpus of English-language news articles. The model, fine-tuned from DistilRoBERTa, was trained on six balanced emotion datasets (e.g., GoEmotions, ISEAR, MELD) and classifies texts into seven categories: six basic emotions – anger, disgust, fear, enjoyment (corresponding to Ekman’s “joy,” 1992), sadness, and surprise – and a neutral class. The model demonstrates 66 % accuracy, significantly outperforming random baselines.

The model is openly accessible via the Hugging Face repository and can be easily deployed using the Hugging Face Transformers pipeline, facilitating its integration into NLP workflows. Recent empirical comparisons confirm the effectiveness of the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model: in a seven-class sentiment classification study on the Google Emotions Dataset, the accuracy gap between a fine-tuned transfer learning model (Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base) and the lowest-performing LLM (Llama 2) was 16.4 percentage points, compared to 8.1 percentage points in the binary experiment (SiEBERT vs. GPT-3.5). This finding suggests that as classification tasks become more nuanced and specific, the applications of LLMs in a zero-shot setting may be less suitable compared to specifically fine-tuned transfer learning models (Krugmann & Hartmann, 2024, p. 15).

The architecture and availability of the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model make it suitable for a range of scientific applications. As demonstrated in recent studies, transformer-based models have been successfully applied across various domains – for instance, in the psycholinguistic analysis of language patterns in rumour and non-rumour

tweets and their reactions (Butt et al., 2022); in modelling cross-modal emotional expression through the generation of descriptive text from musical input (Kuang et al., 2022); and in the longitudinal analysis of sentiment and emotion in news media headlines using automated labelling techniques (Rozado et al., 2022).

Methodology

Corpus Description

This research is based on a purpose-built corpus of English-language news articles covering the war events in Ukraine during the period from February 2022 to early 2025. The corpus comprises 488 full-length articles (including both headlines and body texts), totalling approximately 420,640 tokens. Headlines are included not only for completeness but also due to their recognised role in establishing the interpretive and emotional frame of the article (Dor, 2003; Ifantidou, 2009).

The articles were sourced from over 40 US, UK, EU, and global media outlets, including *The New York Times*, *BBC*, *Al Jazeera*, *Reuters*, *Le Monde*, and *Deutsche Welle*. These sources were selected due to their global reach and functional role that transcends geographical boundaries, as well as for their high editorial standards and frequent reporting on the war events, ensuring both geopolitical balance and thematic depth. This variety enables a comparative analysis of how the war events are emotionally framed across different media systems and political contexts, following the logic of cross-national media studies (Entman, 2004; Nossek, 2004).

To ensure thematic diversity and analytical relevance, we manually categorized 14 generic thematic categories, such as Russian Attacks on Ukraine, Strategic Infrastructure and Key Targets, Major Events of the Full-Scale War and others (see Appendix A on OSF: <https://osf.io/q4zfw/>). Each thematic category includes several specific news hooks (or “news triggers”), referred to in this research as news peg. A total of 61 distinct news pegs were identified, such as the siege of Mariupol, the Bucha massacre, NATO summits, or major Western arms packages and others (see Appendix A on OSF: <https://osf.io/q4zfw/>). For each news peg, eight articles were selected, comprising coverage from four distinct media domains (two US, two UK, two EU, and two global) to ensure cross-outlet representation and comparative analysis of emotions. This sampling strategy enabled us to trace discursive patterns and emotional consistencies or divergences across geopolitical media blocs.

Although not every newsworthy event from the war could be included, this selection focuses on the most salient and widely covered triggers, thereby

capturing emotional narratives and dominant emotionally manipulative tactics shaping global media discourse.

It should be mentioned that the corpus does not aim for exhaustive inclusion of all reporting on the war events in Ukraine. Rather, it constitutes a thematically and temporally representative sample that reflects mainstream editorial trends and narrative construction in different media. This approach is consistent with accepted practices in corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Partington et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2008), where curated, medium-sized corpora are considered analytically robust and methodologically sound for both qualitative and computational inquiry. Based on this thematically and structurally balanced corpus, the next step involved the identification of emotional patterns using automated text classification techniques.

Using the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-Base Model

As outlined above, the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model (Hartmann, 2022) was applied to the previously described corpus of 488 texts, grouped by news pegs across 14 thematic categories, to detect six emotion classes and a neutral category.

Emotion detection was conducted within the corpus's thematic structure, consisting of 14 categories and 61 news pegs. We removed photos, hyperlinks, and irrelevant content that did not pertain to the main body of the article (such as advertisements or unrelated promotional materials). Text formatting and character encoding were standardised to ensure smooth model execution.

The technical implementation of the emotion detection procedure is described below. The classification was implemented in a standard transformer pipeline environment. The model was applied in batch mode to the prepared corpus. The model processed the texts to assign each a predicted dominant emotion with a corresponding probability score. Furthermore, raw probability scores for all emotion classes were extracted for further analysis.

An output structure was created to store the original texts alongside their corresponding predictions and scores. These results were compiled into a structured DataFrame, ensuring one entry per document. The final dataset included the text, its predicted emotion label, the highest confidence score, and the full emotion distribution. These outputs served as the basis for subsequent comparative analysis across media domains and thematic categories.

The results generated by the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model included the dominant emotion and corresponding confidence score for each article, alongside the full distribution across emotion categories. Each article was annotated with metadata indicating the media source, geographic region,

theme, news peg, dominant emotion, emotional tone, and manipulative tactic. These annotations allowed for comparative quantitative analysis of emotional patterns across thematic clusters, events, and media origins.

A Qualitative Analysis

Manual Coding of Emotionally Manipulative Tactics

A manual qualitative analysis was conducted to identify emotionally manipulative tactics within a general manipulative strategy to complete the manipulation detection process in media discourse. This stage involved the development and application of a coding framework based on 18 commonly observed emotionally manipulative tactics, compiled through a close reading of news articles from US, UK, global, and EU media reporting on the war in Ukraine.

A key distinction in this analysis is maintained between the concepts of strategy and tactics. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's (1984) influential differentiation, strategy is a broader overarching plan of action often linked to institutional or ideological objectives (in our case, emotionally manipulative discourse aiming to shape public opinion), whereas a tactic is a localised content-dependent manoeuvre – a rhetorical move within a specific text. Thus, we consider general emotionally manipulative strategy as the overarching intention to employ emotions for persuasive or ideological purposes, while tactic is a specific linguistic and visual means of achieving this. As Wodak (2015, p. 5) notes in the context of critical discourse analysis, “strategies refer to more global and often abstract plans of practices, whereas tactics are the concrete realisations of these strategies in discourse”. This dual-level coding approach allowed us for a more nuanced understanding of how emotional manipulation operates both at the structural and rhetorical levels in wartime media narratives.

The selection of tactics was grounded in prior theoretical and empirical research in media discourse and emotional manipulation (e.g. Wodak, 2015, Chouliaraki, 2006) and an inductive review of representative news articles. Each tactic represents a recurring rhetorical device and emotional framing mechanism influencing public perception and emotional response. These tactics include *Appeal to personal tragedy*, *Focus on vulnerable groups*, *Victim-aggressor contrast*, *Demonisation of the enemy*, *Use of shock visuals or descriptions*, *Emphasis on scale of tragedy*, *Testimonies from victims or witnesses*, *Moral polarisation (“us vs. them”)*, *Idealisation of the victim*, *Emotional heroism of rescuers*, *Fear-based mobilisation*, *Irreparable loss rhetoric*, *Appeal to humanitarian norms*, *Emotional quotes from personal writings*, *Escalation through emotional layering*, *Symbolic imagery of tragedy*,

Collective emotional identification, and *Rhetoric of innocence*. They were identified manually through close reading and qualitative interpretation of content in each news article. From a conceptual standpoint, this procedure aligns with thematic analysis (TA), defined as “a set of methods for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 1). Our approach resonates with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasises the researcher’s instrumental, interpretative role in generating themes. The manual coding procedure aimed to determine the presence of individual tactics and whether the article engaged in emotionally manipulative communication. Each news article was therefore labelled with a binary classification: manipulative or non-manipulative, based on the presence and function of emotionally charged content.

To assess the overall emotional tone of the news articles, we used the online version of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) tool (LIWC, n.d.), which provides a preliminary computational analysis of emotional valence across the texts.

Having established the framework for identifying emotionally manipulative tactics through computational and manual methods, the next step is to outline the specific research questions that guided the analysis. Thus, we also hypothesised the correspondence between the media text origin and the alleged media sentiment emotion. The investigation was aimed at accounting for the following research questions:

RQ₁: Which emotions are most prevalent in English-language media reports on the Russia-Ukraine war, and what linguistic and rhetorical patterns accompany their expression?

RQ₂: What emotionally manipulative tactics out of 18 earlier allocated are most frequently correlated with a certain emotion out of six indicated along with a neutral class?

RQ₃: Do patterns of emotional dominance differ across four media domains (US, UK, EU, and global)?

Reciprocated together, these questions are intended to explain how emotions operate within international media narratives on the war, and to what extent they serve not merely an expressive, but a strategically manipulative purpose and whether it depends on the news platform’s origin.

Results

Overall Emotional Distribution

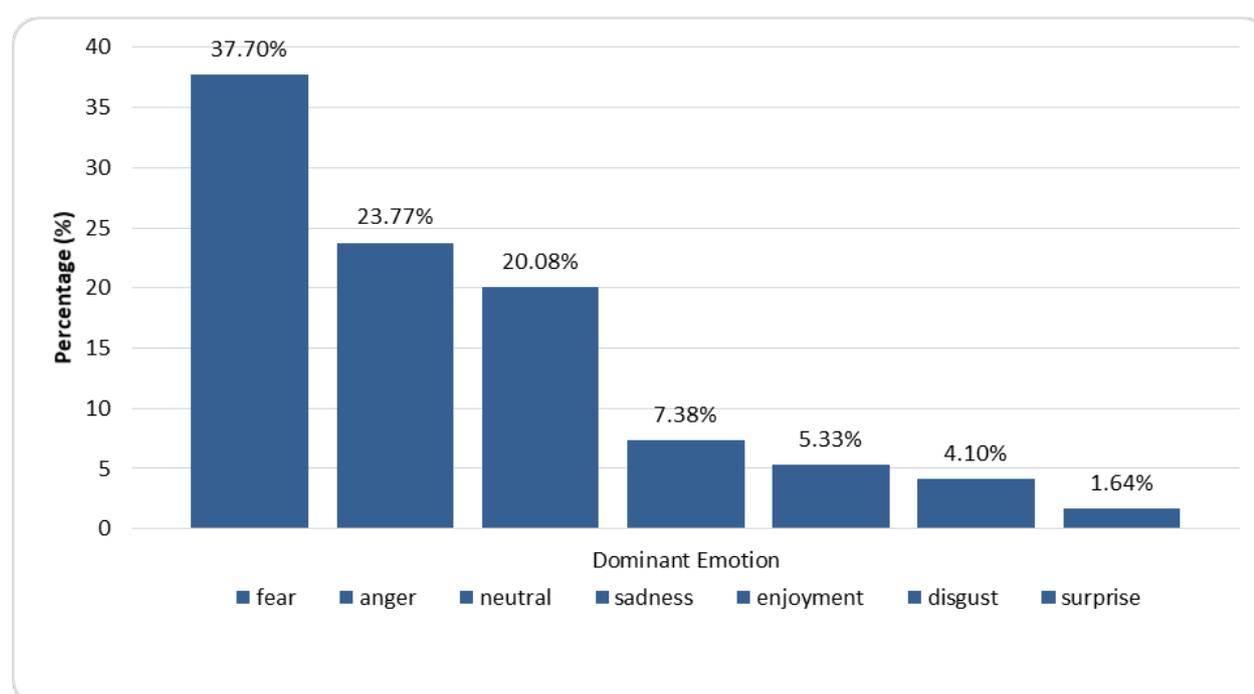
Focusing on English-language news articles from 2022 to 2025, we examined how dominant emotions were distributed to comprehend the emotional

patterns of the Russia-Ukraine war in the international media discourse. As shown in Figure 1, the emotional pattern is strongly dominated by negative emotions. Fear emerged as the most prevalent emotional category, accounting for 37.7 % of all analysed articles. Neutral content comprised 20.08 % of the dataset, indicating that although a significant portion of reporting attempted to maintain an objective tone, most articles were emotionally charged. Sadness appeared in 7.38 % of articles, typically accompanying reports on casualties, forced migration and civilian suffering. Positive emotions were rare: enjoyment occurred in only 5.33 % of the articles, often tied to moments of hope, resilience, and international support. Disgust (4.10 %) and surprise (1.64 %) were the least represented, suggesting that these emotions played a marginal role in the emotional narrative constructed by the media.

Overall, the results reveal a predominantly negative emotional distribution, with fear and anger jointly constituting over 61 % of the emotional content. This heavy emotional pattern underscores the potential of media coverage to influence public perception through effective intensification, initiating the deeper analysis of an emotionally manipulative strategy.

Figure 1

Distribution of Dominant Emotions Across the Corpus of English-language News Articles on the Russia–Ukraine war (2022–2025), As Detected by the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-Base Model



Emotion by Category

Table 1

Heatmap of the Number of Detected Emotion Instances Across 14 Thematic Categories

Thematic Category	Anger	Disgust	Fear	Enjoyment	Neutral	Sadness	Surprise
1	20	3	32	0	0	9	0
2	6	1	15	0	0	2	0
3	18	1	27	6	14	4	2
4	24	0	23	1	21	3	0
5	6	0	24	5	35	1	1
6	2	0	7	7	0	0	0
7	11	12	13	0	5	6	1
8	2	0	4	0	2	0	0
9	10	0	10	2	7	2	1
10	4	0	7	1	4	0	0
11	5	3	5	1	3	7	0
12	0	0	11	1	3	2	0
13	6	0	2	2	2	0	3
14	2	0	4	0	2	0	0

Detected Emotions



Number of detected instances

Table 1 shows a heatmap visualisation of detected emotion instances across 14 thematic categories. The table provides a structured overview of the emotional distribution based on a news dataset annotated with emotion tags using the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model. The emotion of fear was the most prevalent, with particularly high intensity in Category 1 (Russian Attacks on Ukraine), Category 3 (Major Events of the Full-Scale War), Category 5 (International Military and Political Support for Ukraine), and Category 4 (Ceasefire Talks and Peace Negotiations). A substantial number of instances of anger were also recognised, especially in Categories 4, 1, and 3. Neutral tone was most frequently detected in Category 5, followed by Categories 4 and 3. Sadness occurred predominantly in Category 1, followed by Category 11

(International Involvement and Foreign Fighters) and Category 7 (War Crimes and Humanitarian Tragedies), with scarcely fewer examples observed in Category 3. While the aforementioned emotions were dominant, enjoyment, disgust, and surprise emerged less frequently. Joy was most apparent in Category 6 (NATO Expansion), followed by Categories 3 and 5. Disgust was primarily identified in Category 7, with a few additional instances in Categories 1 and 11. Surprise appeared only seldom, reaching its highest count in Category 13.

This heatmap allows a systematic comparison of most emotions across different thematic clusters, thereby providing a foundation for the cross-media and cross-category comparison presented in the subsequent sections.

Cross-Domain Comparison

Figure 2

Distribution of Dominant Emotions Across Different Media Domains (US, UK, Global, EU) in English-Language News Articles on the Russia–Ukraine War (2022–2025), As Detected by the Emotion English Distilroberta-Base Model.

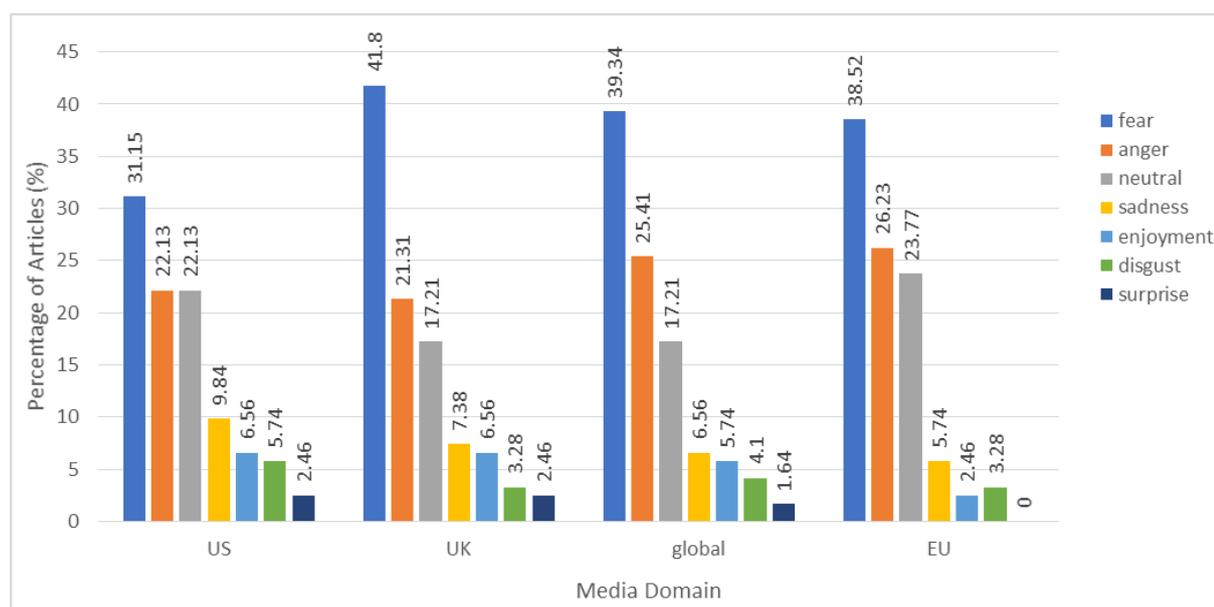


Figure 2 visualises cross-regional variation in dominant emotional patterns in English-language news articles on the Russia-Ukraine war, as detected by the Emotion English DistilRoBERTa-base model.

Fear remained the dominant emotion across all media domains, though its intensity varied (highest in UK media – 41.8 %). Anger was the second most prevalent emotion in all regions except the US, where it shared equal prevalence with neutral tone (22.13 %). EU and global outlets displayed

comparatively higher levels of anger (26.23% and 25.41 %, respectively) than those in the UK (21.31 %) and US (22.13 %).

Neutral tone occurred most frequently in EU media (23.77 %) and US outlets (22.13 %), and was less frequent in global and UK news (both 17.21 %). Sadness was the most prevalent emotion in US media (9.84 %), followed by the UK (7.38 %), global (6.56 %), and EU sources (5.74 %).

In comparison with the dominant emotions, enjoyment, disgust, and surprise were among the least frequently detected emotions across all media domains. Enjoyment was observed more often in US and UK outlets (both 6.56 %) than in global (5.74 %) and EU sources (2.46 %).

Disgust was detected most frequently in US news (5.74 %) and least in both UK and EU media (3.28 %). Surprise was scarcely represented across all domains, with the highest detection in US and UK media (both 2.46 %), and no instances detected in EU media.

The findings underscore discernible variation across media domains, the implications of which will be further interpreted in the “Discussion” section.

Figure 3

Heatmap of Dominant Emotions Across Different Media Domains (US, UK, Global, EU) in English-Language News Articles on the Russia-Ukraine War (2022–2025), As Detected by the Emotion English Distilroberta-Base Model.

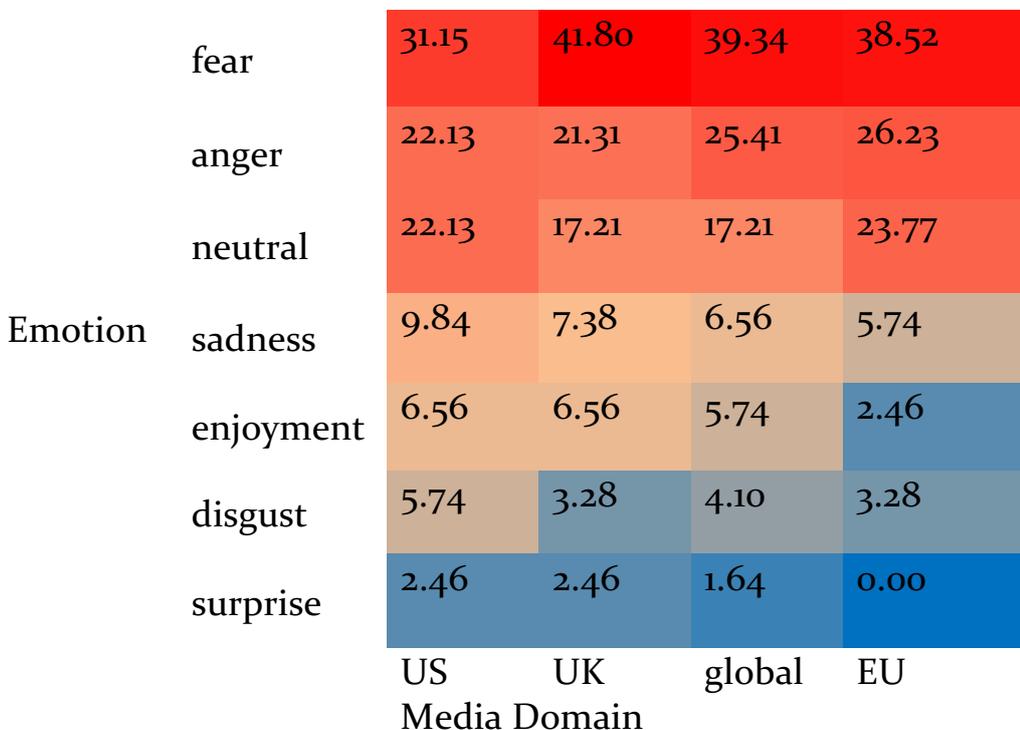
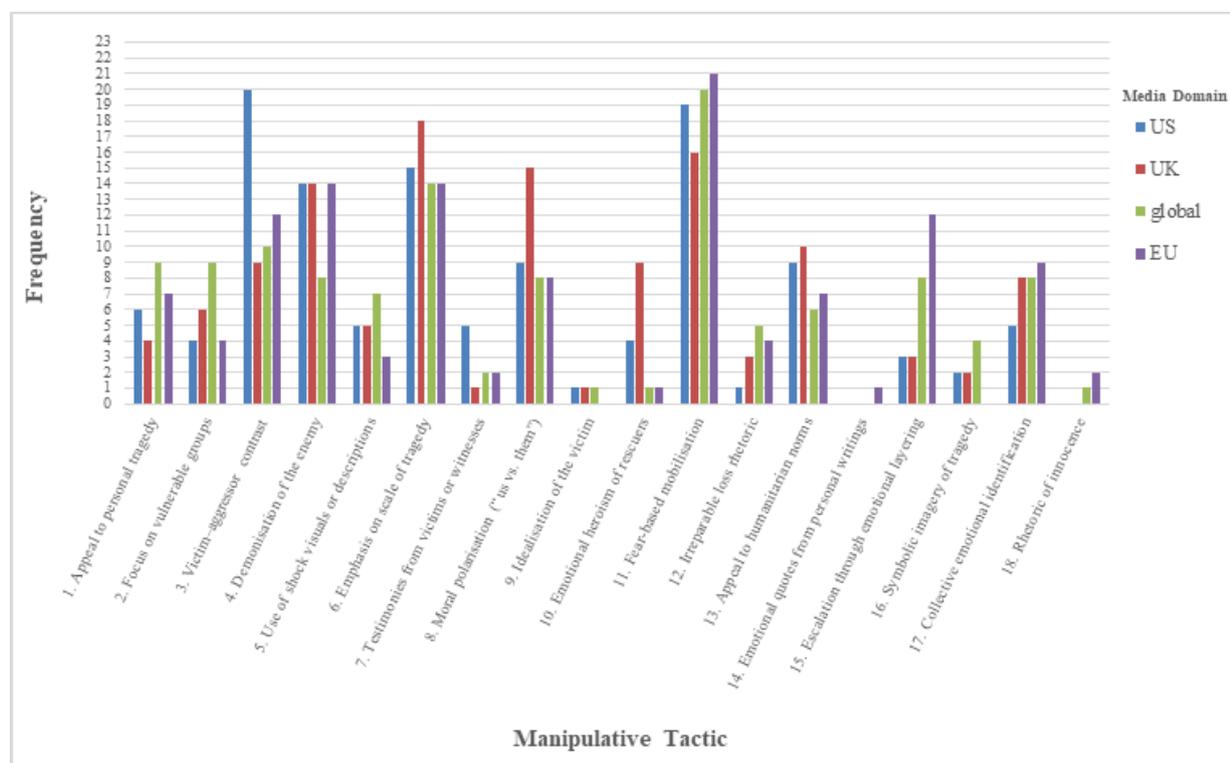


Figure 3 illustrates a heatmap visualisation of emotion intensity across media domains. Using gradient-based visualisation techniques enables the

identification of emotion intensity levels, thus allowing a more visually accessible comparison between media domains. Fear is identified as the most predominant emotion across all media domains, whereas emotions such as enjoyment, disgust, and especially surprise are much less evident. The heatmap underlines key domain-specific emotional patterns and complements the quantitative findings outlined in Figure 2.

Prevalence of Emotionally Manipulative Tactics Across Media Domains

Figure 4
Frequency of Emotionally Manipulative Tactics (1–18) Across Different Media Domains in English-Language News Articles on the Russia-Ukraine War (2022–2025).



Note. Tactic labels correspond to the authors’ coding scheme (see Appendix B on OSF: <https://osf.io/q4zfw/>). Based on 488 manually analysed articles.

Emotional content in war-relating reporting was analysed through the frequency of 18 distinct emotionally manipulative tactics across four media domains: US, UK, global, and EU. These tactics were manually coded in a sample of 488 news articles according to a predefined scheme (see Appendix B on OSF: <https://osf.io/q4zfw/>).

The most frequently used tactic overall was fear-based mobilisation (Tactic 11), with the highest number of occurrences in EU media (21 articles),

followed closely by global (20 articles), US (19), and UK (16) sources. This tactic, which invokes surgency and threat to provoke emotional arousal, reflects the dominant role of fear in the emotional framing observed earlier.

Tactics 6 and 11 dominated all regions, intensifying fear and amplifying emotional urgency.

The victim-aggressor contrast (Tactic 3) was especially prevalent in US media (20 occurrences), suggesting a strong binary framing of the conflict. This pattern also appeared in EU (12), global (10), and UK (9) media.

Several tactics were consistently present across media, such as demonisation of the enemy (Tactic 4), found equally in US, UK, and EU media (14 each), and moral polarisation (“us vs. them”) (Tactic 8), most common in UK media (15) and also prominent in the US (9), global (8), and EU sources (8). These tactics reinforce in-group/out-group dynamics and justify conflict positions.

Other frequently used tactics include appeals to humanitarian norms (Tactic 13), testimonies from victims or witnesses (Tactic 7), and collective emotional identification (Tactic 17), all of which work to build empathy and moral legitimacy.

Notably, some tactics were rare across all sources. For example, symbolic imagery of tragedy (Tactic 16) and emotional quotes from personal writings (Tactic 14) appeared only sporadically. This suggests a preference for direct emotional appeals over more symbolic or reflective forms of pathos.

Overall, the data indicate that emotionally manipulative tactics are widely and consistently used across media contexts, with specific tactics dominating due to their compatibility with fear-driven narratives and simplified binary framings. These findings further substantiate the emotional intensity of war reporting and offer insight into how effective mechanisms may serve persuasive or ideological ends.

Discussion

As identified in our dataset, the emotional distribution of international media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war suggests a pronounced tendency towards high-intensity negative emotions, particularly fear and anger. While the “Results” section confirms their high occurrence rate, it is within the discussion that their discursive implications become analytically prominent.

Building upon the emotional distribution patterns in Table 1, this section discusses the thematic implications of dominant emotions across categories and their relevance for understanding war-related media narratives.

Fear is anticipated to become the most frequent emotion indicated in the Russia-Ukraine war coverage, which is normal both for the numerous reports on all Russia's unprovoked military interventions (Moldova, 1992; Georgia, 2008; Ukraine, 2014 and 2022; Syria, since 2015). Following Van Rythoven's (2015) framework, in media systems of countries with prior exposure to Russian aggression, fear is often culturally embedded and does not require further rhetorical intensification: it is enrooted in collective "security imaginaries" shaped by historical narratives of this military threat. By contrast, in the countries less affected by Russian military action, eliciting fear is not a spontaneous reaction to threat, but rather a culturally mediated collective appraisal, reinforcing audience vulnerability and justifying exceptional political actions.

High involvement of fear in all 4 media domains and 14 thematic categories is further supported by the heatmap results (Table 1): it demonstrates particularly high intensity in categories directly related to the war, reinforcing thus the feelings of insecurity and looming threat. Specifically, Categories 1 and 3 contain frequent emotionally charged narratives that mirror the lived experience of violence and escalation.

Within the emotional landscape of war reporting, fear operates as a key framing mechanism that reinforces perceptions of insecurity, heightened tension, and existential threat. Such emotional framing aligns with established findings in conflict journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) and shapes public perceptions characterised by vulnerability, anxiety, and perceived risk.

A vivid example of this mechanism can be seen in the headline from *The Guardian*: "Russian cruise missile attack on Ukraine city of Lviv kills seven" (Reporter, 2023). The lexical framing combines a direct reference to civilian casualties in Lviv, a city located far from the frontlines, thereby constructing it as unexpectedly vulnerable. The phrase "night-time onslaught" evokes danger and unpredictability, whereas descriptive elements like "heaviest attack," "rubble," and "wrecked parked cars" amplify the scale of destruction. The emotion of fear is deepened through the first-hand testimony of a resident, who sustained facial injuries and said: "I'm sorry for those people who were killed. They were young. So sorry for them. This is terrible. They hit civilians". Her comment evokes helplessness and injustice. Furthermore, the article highlights a symbolic breach of safety, stating that: "Lviv served as a main transit point for millions of refugees from various parts of Ukraine who crossed the border to Europe" and "Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians from the east and south remained in the calmer and safer Lviv." This turning point – from a perceived safe space to a site of potential threat – underscores how discursive

strategies instil fear not only through fact-driven reporting, but also through language choices and the incorporation of personal testimonies.

Our analysis of thematic media content revealed that anger is the second most frequently transmitted emotion in the war coverage. Drawing on Cheung-Blunden and Blunden (2008), the high presence of anger emphasises the discrete-functionalist perspective: anger is linked explicitly to antagonistic action tendencies like attacking, criticising, and supporting war. This supports the idea that when anger is elicited in war coverage, it may be strategically used to mobilise support for conflict or hostile policy. The obtained results of the analysis showed the highest indicators of anger in Categories 4, 1, and 3.

Whereas fear evokes vulnerability and is mainly linked to avoidance, anger is a discursive instrument for creating narratives of injustice and outrage. Anger is predicted to support military actions, underscoring the mobilising potential of anger and its alignment with aggression, retaliation, and justification of forceful actions. In the dataset, the emotion of anger often appears in news media content that condemns acts of aggression, highlights civilian casualties, and criticises international inactivity. This emotion triggers feelings of blame and contributes to the polarisation of the conflict narrative within global coverage.

An illustrative example of anger-laden discourse is evident in the media coverage of Donald Trump's repeated promise to end the war in Ukraine "*within 24 hours.*" In the article, the dissonance between political rhetoric and the situation on the ground is foregrounded: "*Russia and Ukraine have continued to exchange barrages of air attacks, despite Donald Trump having said he would end the war within 24 hours of becoming US president.*" The article further reports that "both launched barrages overnight on Tuesday," drawing attention to the ongoing strikes by Russian and Ukrainian forces. These factual updates are contrasted with Trump's statement that Zelenskyy "*wants to make a peace deal*" and his criticism of Putin: "*Putin would be destroying Russia by failing to make a deal.*" Linguistic choices such as "*vow,*" "*boasted,*" "*sarcastic,*" and "*no specific proposals*" foster suspicion and disapproval, representing Trump's approach as insensible to humanitarian suffering. This contrast between peace-oriented rhetoric and ongoing war calls into question the credibility of political leadership.

The emotion of neutrality constitutes a notable segment of the dataset; however, its prevalence appears insufficient to counterbalance the overarching negativity. The neutral class is especially prominent within Categories 5, 4, and 3. Though emotional neutrality may be the fact of journalistic objectivity, it does not necessarily prove emotional absence. Instead, neutrality in media reporting – especially within specific thematic categories such as international

military support, diplomatic negotiations, and large-scale war events – often functions as a rhetorical strategy to foster credibility and restraint.

However, scholars have argued that neutrality may act as an emotional frame, especially in Western media cultures where objectivity is equated with emotional detachment (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). In this view, neutrality is a “white emotion” that legitimises content through subdued tonality and the omission of overt affective cues. Therefore, the prevalence of neutrality in the aforementioned categories may reflect a lack of affect. However, a strategic affective posture – one that supports public trust, minimises polarisation, and fulfils the media’s role as a perceived neutral broker of information during wartime.

Neutrality manifests through fact-driven, balanced reporting that avoids overt emotional triggers. For instance, the tone remains restrained in reporting on military aid, despite the geopolitical implications: *“Ukraine has received its first batch of US-made F-16 fighter jets, Volodymyr Zelensky said on Sunday, adding that more are needed to beat back Russian forces.”* Similarly, a news story covering U.S.-mediated negotiations provides a factual sequence without evaluative commentary: *“Peace talks between U.S. and Russian delegations aimed at ending the war in Ukraine are underway Monday in Saudi Arabia.”* Neutrality in war reporting serves as a stylistic and rhetorical strategy through which political content is presented in a controlled and rhetorically moderated manner.

Beyond neutrality, the emotional spectrum of war coverage also includes sadness, which is less dominant but ethically resonant. This emotion emerges particularly in reporting on Russian attacks, war crimes, and large-scale tragedies (categories 1, 11 and 7). Examples of sadness are especially apparent in news coverage of civilian casualties, and the exposure of mass atrocities. Following Mayor et al. (2022) and the idea of affecting readers’ emotional spectrum via the media messages, the emotion of sadness in the war coverage is viewed as a moralising force.

Sadness underscores the depth of humanitarian loss and ethical rupture, evoked through reports of missile strikes killing civilians, bodies lying on the ground, and residential buildings left in ruins. A media report on a missile strike in Kryvyi Rih states: *“A Russian missile strike in the central Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih killed 18 people, including nine children, and injured more than 60 others.”* The emotional salience is further heightened through the integration of personal testimony: *“The missile struck an area right next to residential buildings – hitting a playground and ordinary streets,”* and *“There can never be forgiveness for this,”* said Oleksandr Vilkul... *“Eternal memory to the victims.”* Here sadness functions as part of a broader narrative strategy that positions readers as observers and witnesses morally compelled to react.

Similarly, a report on a Russian ballistic missile attack on the city of Sumy conveys a devastating sense of loss: “*At least 34 people have been killed and 117 injured, including 15 children.*” The emotional impact is intensified by its symbolic context: “*The strike hit right in the heart of the city on Palm Sunday,*” and “*Only completely deranged scum can do something like this,*” said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. These examples demonstrate how the emotion of sadness is discursively shaped through narrative and lexical cues underscoring the psychological and ethical costs of the war.

While enjoyment appears least frequently in the dataset, its presence (Categories 3, 5 and 6) reflects moments of positive geopolitical developments: successful negotiations, new security alliances, or increased international aid.

The emotion of disgust, though less prominent overall (Category 7), emerges with particular intensity in reports detailing mass casualties, environmental devastation, and inhumane wartime conditions. News stories covering incidents such as the Kramatorsk station attack (“*missile kills at least 52 at crowded Ukrainian train station*”), ecological disasters (“*destruction of the Ukraine dam caused ‘toxic timebomb’ of heavy metals*”), the battle for Bakhmut and its rising casualties, ICC-issued arrest warrants for Putin over war crimes, and the discovery of mass graves with signs of torture evoke a discourse of moral condemnation and emotional repulsion. The emotional impact is amplified through discursive strategies – linguistic intensification, metaphorical framing (e.g., “*toxic timebomb,*” “*mass grave*”), and emotionally charged headlines (Baum & Abdel, 2021). These evoke visceral reactions and function as affective implications that centralise audience judgment and reinforce the media’s moral framing of the conflict. In this context, disgust is politically performative, reinforcing collective outrage and legitimising demands for justice or accountability.

Overall, the emotional distribution identified in this study suggests that fear emerges as the most dominant emotion, deeply embedded in narratives of violence, escalation, and existential threat. As shown in categories such as Russian attacks and major war events, fear is a mobilising and securitising force, reinforcing vulnerability and legitimising extraordinary political responses. This aligns with previous findings indicating that fear does not always need to be rhetorically stimulated: it may function through historically embedded collective imaginaries, especially in countries with previous experiences of Russian aggression.

Alongside fear and anger emerges as another dominant emotion with distinct rhetorical implications. Both emotions work not only to engage the audience effectively but also to structure moral and political evaluations of the conflict.

Sadness, though less dominant, plays a key role in emphasising humanitarian loss. Disgust, though rare, is concentrated in contexts of atrocities and environmental damage, serves as an intensifier for moral repulsion and delegitimising the aggressor's actions.

Enjoyment and surprise are markedly irregular, primarily occurring in stories about international support or symbolic geopolitical progress (e.g., NATO expansion). These rare emotional expressions offer brief moments of optimism or symbolic progress yet remain overshadowed by dominant affective framing.

The neutral reporting is especially present in politically sensitive categories such as ceasefire negotiations or foreign military aid and reflects an attempt by some media outlets to maintain journalistic objectivity. However, neutrality here is a stylistic strategy that still functions within the broader affective scaffolding of the war.

Together, these emotional profiles construct a layered media narrative that moves beyond reporting facts to shaping public responses: they are not spontaneous or passive but strategically selected and distributed in ways that form public perception, reinforce ideological positions, and support manipulative framings. Emotional suggestions (fear, anger, and sadness) act as engagement mechanisms and subtle instruments of rhetorical control. These findings provide a critical foundation for the subsequent analysis of how emotionally charged language contributes to the implementation of emotionally manipulative tactics in international news coverage of the war in Ukraine.

The cross-domain analysis (Figure 2 and Figure 3) confirms that fear is the most dominant and consistently deployed emotion across all English-language media sources. Its highest prevalence was detected in UK media and suggests an editorial tendency toward fear-driven mobilisation, likely aimed at sustaining audience engagement through heightened emotional urgency. A similar but slightly reduced pattern is observed in global, EU, and US coverage.

Although anger is the second most common emotion in most media contexts, US coverage deviates, displaying a balanced share of anger and neutrality (both 22.13 %), pointing to a more measured or cautious emotional tone. A representative example is the *CNN* article on Ukraine's counteroffensive (Lister, 2023), where emotional language is restrained. The linguistic profile of the article is marked by hedging devices (“*perhaps*”, “*far too early*”) and evaluative neutrality, avoiding exaggerated claims or emotional appeals. This strategy reflects Tactic 15, prioritising factuality and professional commentary over emotional amplification.

In contrast, the article from *El País* titled “*Russian attacks leave over a million Kharkiv residents without electricity or water*” (Segura et al., 2024) reveals a strong presence of sadness, despite the overall low frequency of this

emotion in European media. The emotional weight of the article stems from its lexical selection (*“weakened her resolve”, “worse now”, “left the city”*) and narrative sequencing, which focuses on personal loss, infrastructural collapse, and civic despair. Linguistically, concrete noun phrases (*“diesel generator”, “30-liter water tank”, “1970s Soviet apartment block”*) ground abstract suffering in material reality, making sadness both visible and tangible.

In comparison, *Politico’s* interview with Ukraine’s Foreign Minister, where the phrase *“Give us the damn patriots”* is quoted directly, displays the intersection of anger and strategic urgency. Linguistically, expletives, direct speech and urgency markers reflect frustration and moral imperative. The emotional tone is intensified by syntactic emphasis on unmet needs (*“we would be able to protect ...”*), pointing at responsibility assignment, where blame is subtly redirected toward Western inaction.

Regarding regional contrast, EU media show a paradox: while they exhibit the highest neutrality and lowest sadness, their emotional profiles are not devoid of rhetorical intensity. Instead, emotional restraint may reflect editorial codes of objectivity, where emotion is embedded rather than overt. When relying solely on emotion classification models may overlook how syntax, diction, and narrative focus collaboratively shape emotional perception.

The findings demonstrate a constant and strategic use of emotionally manipulative tactics, highlighting the centrality of emotional patterns in war-related reporting. Fear-based mobilisation (Tactic 11) predominates across all four media domains. On the linguistic level, this tactic involves intensifiers, dramatic verbs, vivid imagery, and anticipatory framing that emphasises danger and vulnerability. In the article *“Russia launches deadly wave of missile attacks on Ukraine cities”* (Graham-Harrison & Mazhulin, 2023), fear is encoded in phrases such as *“deadly wave of missile attacks”, “most intense aerial bombing in weeks”,* and *“fragments... fell on the house”*. The use of violent verbs (*“sheared off”, “reducing them to rubble”, “left nearby rooms on fire”*) and emotionally charged nouns (*“grim reminder”, “innocent Ukrainians in their sleep”*) evokes an atmosphere of helplessness and terror. The article amplifies fear through repetition of threats (*“seven missiles targeted the city”, “air raid alarms sounded across the country”*) and emphasises systemic vulnerability (*“Ukraine risked running out of missiles and ammunition”, “depleted systems”*). Altogether, this emotionally charged lexicon and syntactic framing create a sense of looming threat, reinforcing fear as the dominant interpretive frame.

Emphasis on the scale of tragedy (Tactic 6), being widely used in both UK and US media. It is aimed at amplifying the perceived magnitude of suffering, often through quantified loss, detailed destruction, and emotionally evocative imagery. In the article *“Russian Missile Strikes on Civilian Buildings Kill at Least 25 in Ukraine”* (NY Times, 2023) the tragedy is foregrounded immediately in the

headline through the quantified loss: “*Kill at Least 25*”, which primes the reader for a narrative of large-scale civilian harm. Phrases “*a rocket slammed into an apartment block*”, “*reducing the front to ruin*”, and “*more than half of the 46 apartments were destroyed*” use violent action verbs (slammed, destroyed) and totalizing quantifiers (*more than half*) to dramatise destruction. Additionally, the narrative juxtaposes domestic innocence with abrupt violence – “*a young woman and her two-year-old child had been killed*”, “*a 13-year-old girl injured in her apartment*” – creating an emotionally jarring contrast that heightens the reader’s empathetic response.

According to the quantitative data, one of the most ideologically charged and constantly employed tactics is the victim-aggressor contrast (Tactic 3). It constructs the conflict through binary moral framing, juxtaposing a vulnerable, innocent victim against a ruthless, immoral aggressor. For example, lexically the article “*Russian airstrike in Zelensky’s hometown in Ukraine kills at least 18*” (CBS News, 2025) foregrounds civilian suffering through emotionally loaded collocations such as “*killed 18 people, including nine children*”, “*injuries from a 3-month-old baby to elderly residents*”, etc. These word choices contribute to the image of Ukraine as entirely civilian and innocent, emphasising the indiscriminate nature of the attack. Significantly, the location (Zelensky’s hometown) adds symbolic weight, making the victim side more personal and emotionally linking the tragedy to the figure of the president.

Conversely, the Russian side is presented via evaluative distancing and scepticism. The *Russian Defence Ministry claimed ...* structure, repeated with modalized hedging (“*could not be independently verified*”), constructs a contrast not only in terms of moral legitimacy but also in epistemic credibility. Russia is discursively cast as a manipulator of truth. Meanwhile, Ukrainian voices are amplified through direct quotes (“*There can never be forgiveness for this*”, “*Every missile proves Russia wants only war*”), which intensify emotional judgment and delegitimise the Russian position further.

Structurally, the article allocates space disproportionately to Ukrainian civilian losses and Western diplomatic reactions. The deployment of high-frequency conflict-related lexis (“*strike*”, “*attack*”, “*killed*”, “*terror*”, “*refused ceasefire*”) about Russia, combined with emotive and familial lexicon (“*children*”, “*mother*”, “*playground*”, “*home*”) about Ukraine, deepens the victim-aggressor opposition both thematically and lexically.

The strong presence of Tactic 3 suggests a binary worldview often embedded in US conflict coverage, consistent with previous findings on American war journalism’s preference for apparent moral dichotomies (Chouliaraki, 2006). Similarly, the distribution of demonisation of the enemy (Tactic 4) and moral polarisation (Tactic 8) across all media discourses reflects a confirmed pattern of in-group and out-group framing.

Interestingly, consistently present tactics, such as testimonies from victims (Tactic 7), appeals to humanitarian norms (Tactic 13), and collective emotional identification (Tactic 17), are associated with empathy-building and moral legitimacy, suggesting that emotional persuasion functions along both confrontational and solidaristic axes. These approaches humanise the conflict and evoke identification, potentially fostering support for humanitarian or political intervention.

Conversely, the rare use of more reflective or symbolic strategies, including symbolic imagery of tragedy (Tactic 16) and personal emotional writings (Tactic 14), indicates a selection for overt emotional appeals. This trend may reflect the fast-paced and attention-driven nature of contemporary news cycles, where audience engagement is better captured with direct emotional stimuli.

These patterns affirm that emotional manipulation in war reporting is not random but guided by recognisably strategic choices. The dominance of fear, binary moral framings, and emotionally charged storytelling suggests a media logic prioritising immediacy, clarity, and effective persuasion. This has significant implications for all media stakeholders, including consumers, policymakers, and scholars. The indicated patterns raise questions about the ethical boundaries of emotional framing and the potential consequences for public understanding of complex geopolitical events.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the emotional landscape of international media discourse on the Russia-Ukraine war, focusing on the distribution of emotional categories, cross-domain differences, and their alignment with manipulative tactics. The findings indicate that an uneven distribution of emotional tone marks international media coverage of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Fear and anger were distinguished as prevailing over other emotional categories: they function as strategic frames, shaping perceptions of threat, vulnerability, injustice, and blame.

Fear dominates in narratives of military escalation and existential threat, reinforcing Ukraine's precarity and the call for international support. Anger, frequently co-occurring with fear, structures narratives of moral outrage and retributive justice, especially in the context of war crimes and civilian attacks. Sadness humanises the conflict through coverage of civilian casualties, mass atrocities, and everyday suffering. Disgust, though rarer still, emerges with particular intensity in news of atrocities and environmental devastation,

amplifying moral condemnation and delegitimising the aggressor's actions. In contrast, enjoyment and surprise appear marginally, suggesting emotional fatigue and audience adaptation. Neutrality functions as a rhetorical strategy aimed at preserving objectivity, rather than as a marker of emotional detachment.

The comparisons of cross-domain levels reveal a range of consistent yet varied emotional patterns: fear was most prominent in UK coverage, suggesting reliance on fear-driven narratives; EU and global media displayed higher levels of anger; the US media stood out for the highest level of sadness and a more balanced emotional distribution overall. It should be noted that a neutral tone was more frequent in EU and US media, reflecting efforts to maintain editorial restraint.

These emotions were often linked with emotionally manipulative tactics, particularly fear-based mobilisation, victim-aggressor framing, and emphasis on tragedy through emotional layering: they dominate in media coverage, shaping perception through urgency, moral dichotomies, and amplified empathy. Media coverage frequently employed loaded language, dramatic syntax and selective narrative structuring. Tactics such as demonisation, moral polarisation, and personal tragedy provoked confrontation and fostered solidarity. The rarity of reflective tactics suggests the prioritisation of immediacy over analysis.

Certainty about the results of the investigation was achieved by applying a transformer-based model for emotion detection. The study demonstrates the utility of NLP tools in uncovering latent emotional framing by integrating automated emotion classification with qualitative insights.

However, limitations remain. Emotion detection models are affected by linguistic ambiguity, cultural variation and the opacity of transformer-based architectures, functioning as “black boxes”. Automated systems may overlook rhetorical subtleties or fail to capture irony, satire, or culturally coded emotional expression. Future research could extend this study by analysing visual content, audience reactions, or cross-linguistic variations to better understand how emotional narratives influence public opinion over time.

In conclusion, war reporting not only informs but constructs affective narratives that shape public sentiment, legitimise political action, and reinforce dominant frames – turning the media sphere into a discursive battlefield where emotions function as both instruments of influence and tools of resistance.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository at <https://osf.io/q4zfw/>.

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