The Israel–Gaza war and Russian-Speaking YouTubers' Digital Memory in Israel[1]

Abstract

On October 7, 2023, the Israel–Gaza war began. Social media influencers (SMIs), particularly Russian-speaking YouTubers in Israel, became key figures in shaping public opinion about it. These YouTubers played a crucial role in mediating their experiences during the conflict Russian-speaking communities in Israel and worldwide. From the perspective of memory studies, they participated in the construction of diasporic memory by providing firsthand accounts of the war, challenging dominant narratives, and creating an alternative historical record through their digital platforms. This study investigated how Russian-speaking SMIs in Israel used YouTube as a platform to mediate the war, offering testimonies that serve as historical documentation. The findings show that these YouTubers presented themselves not only as Israeli citizens but also as leaders of public opinion, curating and sharing information for a global audience. Their vlogs contributed to shaping a public memory of the conflict, reflecting the democratizing role of digital media in memory-making and offering space for alternative historical narratives to emerge.

Keywords: Israel Israel–Gaza war, digital memory, Russian-speaking YouTubers, social media influencers (SMIs), parasocial relationships.

1 This article is dedicated to the memory of my dear mother, Rimma Abdulaev, who passed away unexpectedly in February 2025.

Introduction

The Israel–Gaza war erupted on October 7, 2023, with military operations concentrated primarily in southern Israel. Within days, however, reports of escalating hostilities in the country's north signaled the opening of a second front. As the conflict expanded geographically, social media assumed a central role in processes of memory–making. Digital platforms became arenas in which narratives and counter–narratives circulated rapidly through intertwined streams of information and disinformation (Greenland, et al., 2024; Koblentz–Stenzler et al., 2023). The digital environment functioned not merely as a conduit for factual exchange but as an active site where memory was produced, negotiated, and contested, mirroring the fragmented and multivocal character of contemporary memory practices (Pshenychnykh et al., 2024).

Within these dynamics, social media influencers (SMIs) and celebrities emerged as significant mediators of public memory. Their content shaped understandings of the war among Israeli citizens and international audiences alike, positioning them as influential memory agents who either reinforced or challenged dominant political and media discourses (Abdulav, 2025; Barnea, 2024). Despite the pervasive uncertainty, psychological strain, and trauma experienced by Israeli society (Saar–Ashkenazi et al., 2024), individuals continued to document wartime experiences to sustain a sense of normalcy and articulate the conflict's emotional and cognitive dimensions. On platforms such as YouTube, these efforts materialized as digital testimonies and war diaries. Such materials served not only as personal records but also as contributions to a distributed, participatory archive of public memory that extended beyond traditional repositories into a global digital sphere where memory remained fluid and negotiated (Ristić, 2024).

This article examines the role of Russian–speaking YouTubers in Israel in shaping diasporic memory during the conflict. These creators influence collective remembrance within the local Russian–speaking community while simultaneously engaging transnational audiences. By documenting and interpreting their lived experiences of war, they act as digital curators of memory, offering narratives that challenge, or complicate portrayals disseminated by Russian state media and presenting what they perceive as more accurate accounts of unfolding events.

Literature Review

Digital Memory, YouTubers, and the New Ecology of Memory

The expansion of digital media has fundamentally reshaped the ways memory is produced, stored, and circulated, particularly in contexts marked by conflict and social upheaval. Digital technologies broaden participation in memory-making by enabling non-elite actors, such as ordinary citizens, immigrants, diasporic communities, and other marginalized groups, to document and share their experiences with unprecedented speed and visibility (Gordon & Tirosh, 2025; Pshenychnykh et al., 2024). By significantly lowering technological, economic, and institutional barriers to media production, online platforms contribute to the democratization of memory. As a result, traditional gatekeeping institutions no longer hold exclusive authority over historical narration; instead, everyday users increasingly function as active curators of personal and collective pasts (Kot et al., 2024; Smit et al., 2017).

Within this transformed media environment, the rise of SMIs is closely linked to the proliferation of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube (Costa, 2022; Himelboim & Golan, 2023; McCorquodale, 2019). SMIs leverage sustained online visibility to shape public opinion, cultural meanings, and consumer behavior. Their influence is not primarily institutional but relational, grounded in their capacity to produce content that is perceived as authentic, relevant, and emotionally resonant (Abdulaev, 2025; Abidin, 2018; Kot et al., 2024).

Founded in 2005, YouTube plays a pivotal role in the current media ecosystem as a global platform for visual storytelling and interactive communication (Godin & Ghislain, 2024; Lev-On, 2012). Unlike traditional broadcast media, it offers a dynamic, two-way interaction between content creators and their audiences. This interaction allows for ongoing dialogue through comments, live streams, and direct feedback, providing a sense of connectivity and engagement that traditional media do not (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Kot et al., 2024).

In wartime, such interactivity becomes essential for maintaining normalcy and community resilience. The ability to create and share videos allows individuals to document their lived experiences, offering real-time insights into the realities of conflict. These digital testimonies, often produced by people directly impacted by war, can function as a form of collective memory, helping communities process and cope with trauma. Furthermore, they provide an avenue for people to express their emotional responses to the ongoing conflict, which can be instrumental in preserving a sense of normalcy in the face of disruption (Bräuchler, 2024).

This process of video creation and sharing also plays a role in fostering solidarity among affected individuals and broader communities (Godin & Ghislain, 2024; Malmberg & Pantti, 2020). By sharing experiences, survivors of war can feel seen and heard, thereby contributing to their sense of belonging within a larger community. The visibility of these videos can strengthen the bonds between disparate groups, which might otherwise feel isolated, creating a sense of shared purpose and resilience (Kot et al., 2024).

The formation of parasocial relationships is also significant in this context. Parasocial relationships are one–sided yet emotionally meaningful connections that viewers develop with content creators (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Llovet & Establés, 2023; Malmberg & Pantti, 2020; Mandujano–Salazar, 2022; Munnukka et al., 2019). In wartime, celebrities and SMIs, who may be seen as accessible, authentic, and empathetic, become figures through whom audiences can process their own experiences. They may offer emotional support, share coping strategies, and create virtual spaces for discussion, contributing to the psychological resilience of their audiences (Crilley & Chatterje–Doody, 2020; Kot et al., 2024).

SMIs frequently share personal narratives through minimally edited videos recorded on mobile devices, reinforcing impressions of immediacy and transparency (Pereira et al., 2018). Through formats such as vlogs, live broadcasts, and interactive question–and–answer sessions, they cultivate intimacy and emotional proximity with their followers. During periods of crisis as well in routine, this affective engagement positions influencers as trusted intermediaries who not only convey information but also shape how events are emotionally interpreted and remembered (Costa, 2022; Godin & Ghislain, 2024; Llovet & Establés, 2023; Malmberg & Pantti, 2020; Munnukka et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2023).

Within this expanded participatory landscape, digital memory refers to the ways the past is recalled, represented, and experienced through online platforms and networked technologies. It encompasses multimodal formats, including text, photographs, audio, memes, livestreams, and especially video, allowing users to engage with history in highly interactive and affective ways. As a result, digital memory is not static; it is continually reshaped by algorithmic circulation, user practices, and the emergence of competing interpretations of the same events (Pshenychnykh et al., 2024; Ristić, 2024).

This conceptual reorientation has been theorized by scholars such as Schwarz (2014), who defines the new ecology of memory as "the system of cultural, mental, and technological structures that shape our relationship with traces and representations of the past" (p. 7). Within this framework, memory is no longer understood as a stable repository but as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of users, platforms, devices, and infrastructural systems. As a result, memory practices become at once more democratized and more vulnerable, structured by

regimes of visibility, platform governance, and commercial logics. As Schwarz further argues, "these representations of the past and their unique temporality are produced by heterogeneous networks consisting of people, computers, and algorithms that aggregate and sort the contributions of different users" (pp. 7–8).

Nowhere is this new ecology more evident than in the digital documentation of war. Social media platforms, particularly YouTube, have become decentralized, global memory infrastructures where wartime testimony is created, shared, and debated in real time (Bräuchler, 2024; Simon, 2023). These digital "war diaries", recorded on smartphones and uploaded within minutes, constitute a new testimonial genre that captures the immediacy of trauma, fear, resilience, and uncertainty. Everyday witnesses thus participate directly in constructing the historical record, challenging institutional monopolies on documenting conflict (Kot et al., 2024).

Prior research demonstrates how such content shapes public memory. For example, Smit et al. (2017) show that eyewitness videos uploaded to YouTube played a significant role in how global audiences understood the 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta, Syria. These artifacts are not neutral but are continually reinterpreted and recirculated by activists, journalists, political movements, and platform algorithms, each of which assigns new ideological or emotional meanings to the footage. In this sense, digital testimonies become public performances of memory, shaping collective understanding in times of crisis (Kot et al., 2024).

Russian-speaking YouTubers in Israel offer a distinctive case. As a community representing roughly 15 percent of the Israeli population, these creators navigate multiple cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical contexts. Their videos operate as vernacular memory practices that capture the lived experience of the war while addressing audiences in Israel, the post-Soviet diaspora, and global Russian-speaking networks. By documenting everyday realities, from air raid sirens to disrupted routines, they act as transnational memory agents who bridge divergent interpretive communities.

The immediacy and unpolished nature of their content, often filmed on mobile devices with minimal editing, contributes to the perception of authenticity. As observed in Ukrainian digital war diaries, such videos convey emotional truth as much as factual detail, making them potent channels for both personal catharsis and public engagement (Kot et al., 2024). Yet their narratives are also shaped by platform logic: algorithmic visibility, monetization structures, recommendation systems, and viral dynamics all mediate what becomes memorable and what remains unseen (Smit et al., 2017). This raises critical questions about the politics of digital storytelling within the new ecology of memory.

Ultimately, the intersection of YouTube, immigrant storytelling, and the evolving ecology of digital memory reflects a significant shift in who participates in wartime remembrance and how these memories circulate globally. Examining Russian–speaking YouTubers in wartime Israel thus provides insight into emergent forms of participatory, transnational memory–making that blur the boundaries between personal testimony, collective trauma, and global networked narratives.

Russian–Speaking Immigrants and Israeli Media

Russian–speaking immigrants in Israel have relocated in various periods, including the pre–Soviet era, Soviet, and most notably post–Soviet era, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as after the onset of the Russia–Ukraine war in 2022 (Ben–Lulu, 2024; Birenbaum–Carmeli, 2021; Chachashvili–Bolotin, 2024; Matusiak, 2021; Ovchinnikova, 2022; Voinova, 2024). While sharing a common linguistic and cultural background, these immigrants often encounter challenges in adapting to the culture of their host country (Akifeva et al., 2023, 2024; Zbenovich, 2016).

Spoken by approximately 255 million people globally, Russian ranks among the ten most widely spoken languages (Statista, 2023). In Israel, around one million Russian speakers represent 15% of the total population (Sfaradi & Sanchez, 2023). Upon their arrival, these immigrants frequently face obstacles such as language barriers, cultural adaptation issues, employment difficulties, and overall integration challenges (Ovchinnikova, 2022; Remennick & Prashizky, 2022, 2023).

Alongside their efforts to integrate into Israeli society, Russian–speaking immigrants continue to maintain their cultural heritage and engage with the global Russian–speaking community. Yelenevskaya and Protassova (2023) highlight the role of Russian in forming virtual transnational communities, which help preserve a "Soviet" identity and foster a sense of belonging through shared cultural narratives and nostalgia for the Soviet past. Similarly, Smoliarova (2023) explores how Russian–speaking immigrants use Instagram to navigate and communicate their experiences of immigration, initially focusing on practical issues such as housing and employment and later shifting towards broader reflections on identity and cultural heritage.

Media, both traditional and digital, play a crucial role in connecting immigrants with their countries of origin and their new home. In Israel, Channel 9 and various print and online newspapers cater to the Russian–speaking community, providing news and information while fostering connections with family and friends in their countries of origin (Barkhatova, 2023; Skliar, 2021; Smoliarova, 2023; Smoliarova & Bodrunova, 2021). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram enable immigrants to share updates, photos, and videos,

thereby creating virtual communities that bridge geographic distances and enhance a sense of belonging (Anton, 2024). These platforms also serve as important sources of information and socioeconomic opportunities and allow immigrants to narrate their personal experiences related to immigration and life in their new country (Barkhatova, 2023; Matusiak, 2021; Zhang & Zhao, 2020). Some immigrants leverage these platforms to become SMIs, such as Youtubers, sharing their stories and experiences with a global audience (Sepehr et al., 2022; Zhang & Zhao, 2020).

Russian-Speaking Immigrants in Peace- and Wartime

Research on digital media use in emergency contexts emphasizes the internet's capacity to rapidly disseminate information, enable collective action, and provide alternative perspectives that may be absent from traditional media (Lev-On, 2012; Lev-On & Uziel, 2018). Social media, particularly YouTube, host a wide range of content creators, including immigrants, whose narratives reflect distinct cultural backgrounds and lived experiences.

Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel are a salient example of how immigrant communities contribute to digital storytelling, offering perspectives that resonate both locally and transnationally while bridging cultural and linguistic divides (Perelmutter, 2018). YouTubers originating from the former Soviet Union have gained visibility and credibility through styles of communication marked by authenticity, directness, and emotional openness. Their content extends beyond entertainment to address social issues, mobilize support for causes, and stimulate public discussion (Abdulaev, 2025; Ovchinnikova, 2022). In both peace- and wartime, they provide insights into everyday life in Israel while maintaining connections to global Russian-speaking audiences, thereby contributing to more inclusive and pluralistic digital media spaces (Abdulaev, 2025; Smoliarova, 2023; Voinova, 2024).

Despite the paucity of studies specifically examining Russian-speaking YouTubers in Israel, related studies demonstrate the importance of Russian-language media during transnational conflicts. Ben-Lulu's (2024) analysis of Reform Jewish communities with Russian-speaking members during the Russia-Ukraine war reveals internal tensions, divergent moral positions, and competing loyalties. These findings highlight the complexity of immigrant media consumption and identity formation when conflicts intersect with multiple national and cultural reference points.

During conflicts such as the Israel-Gaza war, internet and social media use in Israel has intensified, with platforms like Telegram becoming especially prominent (Kahan, 2023). Telegram, a largely uncensored network with strong Russian-language roots, has served as a major channel for both information and disinformation (Birnebaum, 2023). Survey data from

a Russian–language Israeli news site indicate increased reliance on Telegram and Russian–language news sources alongside mainstream media during the current conflict (NEWS.ru.co.il, 2024). This media ecology underscores the continued relevance of Russian–language platforms for immigrants during periods of uncertainty and threat.

The experience of immigrants from the former Soviet Union offers a valuable lens for examining national and social identity in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Arriving mainly in the 1990s and early 2000s, these immigrants entered Israeli society as a large but culturally distinct group, shaped by Soviet and post–Soviet political socialization, secular orientations, and strong linguistic and cultural ties to Russian identity. Integration has therefore involved not only economic and civic inclusion but also ongoing negotiations of belonging and loyalty, particularly during national crises.

Elias (2005) conceptualizes identity as relational and dynamic, produced through shifting interdependencies between individuals and groups. From this perspective, FSU immigrants occupy an ambivalent position: formally included in Israeli society yet often symbolically marked as culturally "other". In wartime, expectations of national solidarity intensify, rendering these tensions more visible. As Elias and Lerner (2012) show in their analysis of Russian–speaking journalists and intellectuals in Israel, such actors often function as cultural mediators, translating Israeli realities into Russian–language frameworks while drawing on transnational intellectual traditions. Social media further amplifies these dynamics by enabling immigrants to participate in national discourse while maintaining alternative communicative spaces.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review, the research questions of this study are: How did Russian–speaking YouTubers in Israel use YouTube to mediate the war? In what ways did their content contribute to the construction of diasporic digital memory among Russian–speaking communities?

Method

To address the research questions, this study adopted a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis. Qualitative data analysis is particularly suited to exploring patterns, themes, and underlying meanings within communicative texts and media artifacts (Berger, 2020; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Thematic analysis enables a systematic yet flexible examination of recurring discursive elements, making it appropriate for investigating how individuals interpret and narrate lived experiences during times of crisis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The empirical material for this study consists of vlogs (hereafter videos) produced by Russian-speaking YouTubers residing in Israel during the early stage of the war. The sampling period spans from October 7, the outbreak of the war, to October 19, 2023. This timeframe was selected to capture the initial phase of the war, when uncertainty and emotional intensity were particularly pronounced.

Relevant videos were identified through targeted keyword searches conducted in both Russian and English. Search terms included израиль влог (Israel vlog), израиль vlog война (Israel war vlog), and Israel war. These keywords were chosen to ensure the inclusion of content that explicitly addressed both everyday life in Israel and the unfolding military events.

In total, 20 videos created by 20 different Russian-speaking YouTubers were selected for analysis (see Table 1). To foreground immediate reactions to the outbreak of the war, only the first video published by each YouTuber within the research period was examined. This strategy was intended to capture spontaneous, unfiltered, and emotionally driven narratives, thereby reducing the influence of retrospective sense-making or strategic self-presentation. All videos were originally recorded in Russian and subsequently translated into English by the author for analytical purposes. The translations aimed to preserve the original meanings, tone, and contextual nuances to ensure analytical reliability and interpretive validity.

Findings

The study analyzed YouTube channels of Russian YouTubers in Israel. None of the YouTubers have directly experienced the events of October 7, nor do they personally know anyone who was killed or injured.

From Lifestyle Vlogging to Moral and Relational Obligation: Follower–Driven Wartime Testimony

Most of the YouTubers stated that they did not intend to film and upload videos about war events or talk about the war because their channel was not political but consisted of videos about their daily life or various issues related to life in Israel. But since the events that took place on October 7, YouTubers stated that considering the questions and concerns from followers, they decided to shoot and upload videos, with the first video referring to the war being uploaded during the first two weeks.

The upload date of the video was not related to the content addressed to the followers and the questions received from the viewers. It seems that each of the YouTubers needed their own time and timing to shoot the video and publish it on YouTube. Also, it is possible that the video was filmed earlier (for example on the same day or after several days) and was not uploaded for reasons that mainly depended on the YouTubers themselves. However, it seems that the catalyst for uploading content related to the war arose precisely from the concerns of the followers.

I decided to shoot the video because many people write to me and ask. Yes, now an event is happening in Israel (Malvina vlog, 7.10.23).

Sometimes YouTubers state that the messages not only reach a private box but also to accounts on other social networks, for example Telegram.

I didn't want to film anything at all, but many messages are coming in privately and on Telegram. Everyone is asking how we are doing […]. I think everyone already knows what is happening with us in Israel. I haven't posted a video [on YouTube] in a long time, I still appear on Telegram (Юля Life vlog, 8.10.23).

Some YouTubers stated that they uploaded the video not only for the viewers who asked and worried, but also out of their desire to tell what is happening in Israel:

There was no video for two weeks. Of course I was not in the mood to make a video, but following many requests from my viewers, I decided to make a video because many are worried, want to know what's going on, what's up with me and of course I myself want to share (BROSH об Израиле, 14.10.23).

Some YouTubers addressed their audience directly and thanked them for their concern:

I want to thank all the viewers and followers of my channel who care about me, my family and all the people of Israel. Thank you very much, it warms my heart at this time, and it strengthens not only me but also the others (Olga Kvet, 10.10.23).

Forms of address varied; some YouTubers referred to their followers as "friends":

Friends, thank you very much for writing to us, how are we doing […] Thank you for worrying about me and asking about mom (Влог Сериал - Намкод, 8.10.23).

Also, YouTubers feel a responsibility in uploading content by seeing themselves as a reliable source to describe what is happening in Israel due to the followers' concerns not only for themselves but also for the followers' family and loved ones:

Friends, following your requests, I will try to shoot short videos and describe the situation here in Israel. You write that your loved ones and extended family are in different places in the country. I'm sorry I didn't think immediately [to upload to YouTube], because I post most of the information on Telegram, so if anything, go to my Telegram channel (Irina LIV ISRAEL, 10.10.23).

However, there were YouTubers who, on their own initiative, decided to film the video for themselves as documentation, as well as for the viewers. They considered it their mission to tell the truth, contrary to everything that was heard and seen in both mainstream and social media:

I filmed this video as a kind of diary for me and for you, to tell everything that is happening these days […] My goal is to tell the whole truth about what is happening in my beloved country (Angelina Minasova, 19.10.23).

Dear friends, good morning […] I just want to tell you how we are and what happened with us, and I'm sure if you're interested in Israel and watch credible news and not propaganda, you probably know more or less what's going on (Gabi Live, 9.10.23).

Thus, most YouTubers filmed their videos in response to questions by their followers. The followers could be Israelis who had experienced the events and also cared about the YouTubers. However, they could also be followers outside Israel who heard about the war from the various media and asked the YouTubers how they were.

As far as the YouTubers were concerned, there were those who uploaded and reassured the viewers immediately after the outbreak of the war, whereas others took time to shoot the video and upload it. YouTubers received reinforcements and appeals from viewers and felt the need to tell the truth as they saw it. Here, the virtual parasocial relationship between YouTubers and followers is emphasized.

Shared Shock and Uncertainty: Experiencing October 7 as an Unexpected National Trauma

All YouTubers talked about the events of October 7 as unexpected. They experienced shock, fear and uncertainty regardless of how long they had been in the country or where. This feeling resonated with the mood across the entire country, as hardly anyone expected an attack from Gaza. For example, YouTubers from the north stated:

We just didn't expect it. A surprise attack by terrorists. From land, from air, from sea. They murdered people (Malvina vlog, 7.10.23).

What happened this morning caused me and everyone who is watching me now to the market, which no one expected. Nothing in the global sense testified to this tragedy (Израиль как он есть, 7.10.23).

The second day of the war in Israel. And although I am not in the area of the hostilities, nor know people who were killed or kidnapped, after reading the news, it was very scary (Israel Alla Life, 8.10.23).

The feeling was also shared among YouTubers who recently arrived in Israel and experienced a state of war for the first time:

These are the scariest days of my life. This is the first time for me to live in a country where there is a war (Штукенция Лайв, 19.10.23).

Thus, the YouTubers saw themselves as citizens of Israel, regardless of geographic region, and like all other citizens they experienced surprise, fear, and uncertainty. Even for the followers who were not citizens of Israel, the very exposure to what was happening in Israel through the YouTubers testified to a parasocial connection. They could identify and feel the emotions caused by the event.

Russian-Language Media as a Primary Information Sphere: YouTubers as Opinion Leaders and Witnesses in Crisis

Regardless of the number of years they have lived in the country, the participants are informed by mainstream and social media in Russian. YouTubers can serve as opinion leaders in interactive communication, so it is important to examine the source or sources of information they rely on. In terms of television viewing, they watch the Israeli Russian-language Channel 9 and follow Telegram accounts.

When we woke up, [my husband] Anton looked directly at the news on his mobile phone and saw. Channel 9 also never broadcasts news on weekends and today there is a broadcast all day (Malvina vlog, 7.10.23).

A YouTuber uploaded her TV screen showing Channel 9:

Terrible and terrible, 600 have already been murdered [...] based on all the news I read during the day, the situation in Israel is difficult, complex and unclear. Our government has not indicated any concrete steps (Israel Alla Life, 8.10.23).

There were YouTubers who preferred to consume information on social media, which sometimes reported without censorship as on Telegram:

When I moved [to Israel], I found several Telegram channels and started reading them and keeping track of what's going on. When I get too stressed, I read them a little less often [...] I have several channels that I either listen to daily on YouTube, with short news segments featuring photos, or I read the news on Telegram. [...] I first found a Russian-language channel where people translate news from Arabic, including a mix of Israeli and Arabic news. So I could understand what's being said on the other side (жизнь с нуля в Израиле, 7.10.23).

After the [rocket] siren, we went on Facebook to read the news and realized that it [rocket fire] was not the main thing and realized that terrorists entered our territory. [...] You can see a lot of news on this topic on Telegram (And I'll Ask about Israel. Alena, 8.10.23).

YouTubers experience emotions and are in the same situation as Israeli citizens or anyone who is in hot spots of conflict and war. This leads to the development of feelings of identification, creates an imagined community, brings people together and serves as a mirror. The YouTubers themselves have gathered information from both traditional and new media, for themselves as well as to tell their followers what is happening.

Digital War Diaries: Firsthand Testimony, Everyday Life, and the Performance of Authenticity

YouTubers presented their videos like a digital media diary, offering a personal and unfiltered look at their daily lives amid the events unfolding around them. They showed and discussed what was happening in their country in real time, providing a unique perspective that traditional media outlets might overlook or filter. Through their content, they documented the impact of the war and the ongoing challenges, often recording scenes from their surroundings – streets, food stores, or daily routines affected by the situation. Many followers trusted these YouTubers because they felt a sense of responsibility to portray the truth and share firsthand experiences with an authenticity that traditional news outlets might not offer. This made their coverage more relatable and reliable.

For example, a YouTuber told the camera, without recorded footage from the field, about the situation in Dimona, in southern Israel, a day after the war broke out.

I was in a store and there was no bread at all. There are a lot of people in the store, they take water, there is no bread […] I don't know, maybe they're afraid […] I don't know what's going on (Юля Life vlog, 8.10.23).

The shortage of products after the attack was the outcome of an announcement by the Home Front Command to stock up on dry food, water and medicines and pack for a possible evacuation. The YouTubers obeyed the instructions.

We live in the north, it's quite calm here […] we went to the store, we're running out of water, now we'll buy a few more groceries, water there and then we'll go home […] we packed our suitcases, well, bags, and some things, documents, water and clothes [In case they have to go down to the shelter]. (Вид из окна, 9.10.23).

Considering the media reports regarding the empty shelves, there were YouTubers who initially set out to document what was happening and pointed out that it was not a mass panic as portrayed in the media. The following quotes are by YouTubers reporting from northern Israel:

[In Haifa,] There is no pressure in the stores, everyone is calm and they don't buy like crazy (Irina LIV ISRAEL, 10.10.23).

I want to show you how we live during a war […]. During a war in Israel all the ice cream parlors are closed […] there are few people outside, but more than yesterday (FROM MOSCOW TO ISRAEL, 12.10.23).

Another YouTuber named multiple acquaintances who arrived at the airport and wrote:

[...] there were a lot of people, and many are sitting there waiting for a flight to take off. And of course, those who are leaving Israel. But of course, there are [also] those who want to come to Israel, and I saw posts of people who want to return but canceled their flights around the world and they want to return home to Israel, etc. (МОСКВИЧКА В ИММИГРАЦИИ, жизнь в разных странах, 12.10.23).

In conclusion, the YouTubers' testimony as a testimony of the YouTubers as a first source is important for presenting the full picture of daily life at the beginning of the war, thus also adding information that is not heard or shown in traditional media. YouTubers often create their videos like a digital media diary, sharing what is happening in their country in real time. The very act of photographing with a personal camera or mobile phone emphasizes the authenticity of the source, providing a raw, unfiltered perspective that connects with their audience on a personal level. Exposure to everyday life through the lens of individual YouTubers offers a more intimate view, showing real moments and emotions rather than polished or generalized content typically presented in traditional media or on social networks by "strangers." This connection fosters a sense of kinship, as followers can relate to the YouTubers' experiences and feel like they are witnessing history through the eyes of someone they trust.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores how Russian-speaking YouTubers in Israel responded to the surprise attack of October 7, 2023, and how their reactions can be understood within broader discussions about media, memory, emotion, and identity in times of conflict. Whereas research has begun to examine the role of journalists and influencers during the Israel-Gaza war (Barnea, 2024; Greenland et al., 2024; Koblentz-Stenzler et al., 2023), the voices of Russian-speaking YouTubers in Israel have received little attention. The study is attentive to questions of national and social identity among Russian Israelis, a group often described as occupying a complex and sometimes ambivalent position within Israeli society (Elias, 2005; Elias & Lerner, 2012). As first- and second-generation immigrants from the former Soviet Union, they have historically negotiated integration into Israeli national identity and the preservation of a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. In wartime, these tensions become especially visible. The responses of Russian-speaking YouTubers therefore offer a unique lens through which to observe how belonging, loyalty, and collective memory are articulated from within a minority yet strongly politicized community.

The central contribution of this study lies in its focus on this underexplored group through the perspective of memory media studies (Bräuchler, 2024; Kot et al., 2024; Schwarz, 2014). It highlights how digital platforms like YouTube function simultaneously as spaces for producing memory and for mediating emotions. The findings show that Russian–speaking YouTubers act not only as content creators but as vernacular memory agents, ordinary individuals who actively shape how the war is remembered, interpreted, and emotionally processed. Speaking to both native Israeli audiences and to a wider Russian–speaking public abroad, they present themselves as authentic witnesses. Their authority stems less from institutional status and more from lived experience as residents and citizens directly affected by the war.

The participants' videos are often emotionally intense, informal, and unpolished. This style reinforces a sense of authenticity and illustrates how digital memory is participatory and affect–driven. The act of documenting the present is already shaped by an awareness of future remembrance, as creators frame their experiences as something that "must be recorded" (Pshenychnykh et al., 2024; Ristić, 2024). In doing so, they contribute to the construction of collective memory while events are still unfolding.

Analytically, the findings are organized around three interconnected circles of engagement and memory–making. In the first, YouTubers appear as private individuals responding to the crisis as residents and citizens of Israel. Their videos resemble digital war diaries that combine personal testimony with public witnessing (Bräuchler, 2024; Kot, Mozolevska & Polishchuk, 2024). By sharing fear, uncertainty, and the disruption of everyday life, they create embodied memories that anchor the war in lived experience rather than abstract political narratives. For Russian Israelis, these expressions also reflect ongoing negotiations of belonging: affirming their place within the Israeli collective while speaking in a language that marks them as socially distinct. Emotional openness serves both a therapeutic purpose and a connective one, allowing creators and viewers to process shock and anxiety together. This dynamic aligns with research on parasocial relationships, which emphasizes how emotional disclosure fosters trust, intimacy, and perceived authenticity (Llovet & Establés, 2023; Malmberg & Pantti, 2020; Pereira et al., 2018).

The second circle positions YouTubers as curators and interpreters of information. Acting within a two–step flow of communication, they filter Russian–language news sources, contextualize them through personal experience, and supplement them with firsthand footage. In doing so, they help construct a shared memory network that both reinforces and challenges dominant media narratives (Gordon & Tirosh, 2025). This role is especially significant given the historical mistrust many Russian Israelis hold toward both Russian and Western media, as noted by Elias and Lerner (2012).

The third circle centers on parasocial interaction, where memory is co-produced within what can be described as digital memory communities. Through comments, messages, and repeated interactions, followers and creators engage in ongoing emotional exchange. These interactions shape collective interpretations of the war and help sustain emotional continuity over time (Mandujano-Salazar, 2022). Here, national identity, minority positioning, and shared language combine to create a sense of community that extends beyond territorial borders.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, it focuses on a relatively small sample and a short timeframe, capturing immediate reactions rather than long-term processes of memory consolidation. Second, the target audience is inferred rather than directly analyzed.

Future research could adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches to examine how these narratives evolve and interact with official commemorative practices. Combining qualitative analysis with quantitative methods, such as engagement metrics and sentiment analysis would further clarify how digital war memories circulate, resonate, and endure across national and transnational Russian-speaking and other migrant communities.

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Table 1
List of Videos

Channel's English name & no. of followers	Title	Date (2023)	Time	Link
Malvina's Vlogs: My Life in Israel	Что происходит в Израиле!?	7.10	5:41	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rl-JOYOHR5Y
Israel as it is (Израиль как он есть)	Война в Израиле | Что произошло ? И что будет дальше ?	7.10	5:02	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZU0wCyxns0
Life from scratch in Israel (жизнь с нуля в Израиле)	ХАМАС напал на Израиль	7.10	23:55	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7qVv0AyLQg
Mia's mom and more (Мама Мии и не только)	9 октября Израиль |3 день войны 19:00	7.10	16:08	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od1rF2V7ONI
And I'll ask about Israel. Alena (А я спрошу про Израиль. Алёна.)	Как живут люди во время войны в Израиле	8.10	13:38	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbamQuAcN1k
Yulia Life vlog (Юля Life vlog)	VLOG: Очень Тяжелые дни в Израиле// Второй день кошмара	8.10	8:34	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_ngmmbj-bU
Israel Alla Life	Израиль. Ситуация сложная	8.10	7:27	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXnFGEnCZio
Vladimir Namkod. A vlog series about life (Влог Сериал - Намкод)	Экстренное включение из Иордании. Ч.5. Израилю объявили войну и власти закрыли границы.	8.10	21:17	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuPwsHFiMTk
Gabi Live	ИЗРАИЛЬ IL 9/10/2023 - КАК НАШИ ДЕЛА? ЧТО ПРОИСХОДИТ	9.10	28:08	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3aKx0IE7Zk
View from the window (Window view) (Вид из окна)	VLOG: Тель-Авив, Иерусалим, Война и Новые друзья	9.10	20:56	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgrVIKd_iQw

Elizabeth Smolianski | Life in Israel	Израиль. Война 2023.	9.10	4:22	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6xvZgKI6QA
The Bank Family	VLOG: 8.10.23. Война в Израиле! Хайфа! Собираем тревожный чемоданчик! Аппликация командование тыла!	9.10	9:58	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9h8NSVpkTY
Irina LIV ISRAEL	Война в Израиле. Какая ситуация в Хайфе. Отвечаю на ваши вопросы	10.10	6:03	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUBFpeCQxEo
Unreal Israel (Нереальный Израиль)	АЭРОПОРТ ИЗРАИЛЯ ПЕРЕПОЛНЕН! / Война в Израиле	10.10	13:49	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8B--yv5eB5o
Olga Kvet	ВОЙНА В ИЗРАИЛЕ 07.10.2023. / 4-ЫЙ ДЕНЬ	10.10	10:58	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcJaL7-N_BY
Israel Unfiltered (ИЗРАИЛЬ БЕЗ ПРИКРАС)	ИЗРАИЛЬ/ КАК СПРАВИТЬСЯ С ТРЕВОГОЙ/ ГОТОВИМ ВМЕСТЕ	11.10	17:59	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5S26zzMyrbc
A Moscow Woman Abroad: Life in Different Countries (МОСКВИЧКА В ИММИГРАЦИИ, жизнь в разных странах)	ВОЙНА В ИЗРАИЛЕ 2023 - КАКАЯ СИТУАЦИЯ НА СЕВЕРЕ ОТВЕЧАЕМ НА ВАШИ ВОПРОСЫ И ПОКАЗЫВАЕМ ГОРОД	12.10	14:55	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iz5Lcyqm-5Q
BROSH ABOUT ISRAEL (BROSH об Израиле)	Война в Израиле. Сюрпризы войны и наша жизнь здесь	14.10	14:05	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3B_PsjCv4vU
Shtukensia Live (Штукенция Лайв)	НАЧАЛАСЬ ВОЙНА в Израиле	19.10	5:17	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMdFAXHjdvs
Angelina Minasova	ВЛОГ ПОД РАКЕТАМИ I война в Израиле 2023, ракетные обстрелы, бомбоубежище, наши будни	19.10	27:49	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2dDKJdLO6g