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VISUAL FRAMES OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN THE MAIN WESTERN EUROPEAN MEDIA

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ABSTRACT. This work analyses the denotative and connotative visual framing of migrants and refugees in European media during the migration crisis in Europe in general and in the Mediterranean in particular. The main objective is to identify the differences between Germany, the country that receives the most asylum requests, and other Western Europe countries (Spain, France, Italy and the United Kingdom). The second goal is to detect temporal differences between the first period of the crisis (2013-2014) and the second period (2015-2017), when the conflict worsened. We content analysed a sample of 500 news photographs from 10 media outlets of five European countries. The results indicate that the most predominant visual frame represents migrants and refugees as victims. However, it was also observed that the frames depicting these individuals as a threat to Western societies are more frequent in German media, and also during the second period of the crisis.

Introduction

Previous literature has extensively studied how Western news media depict immigrants, but few studies have focused on how they represent *migrants and refugees* (recognized refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants using refugee routes) during specific migration crises periods. This fact is surprising considering that the number of forcibly displaced people today is greater than during the World War II. It should also be pointed out that there is a lack of works centred specifically on visual frames as a form of creating realities in news media, indicating that the element of photography and its power to influence audiences has been largely overlooked. In this context, a work using the framing theory to examine how different kinds of displaced people are visually represented in Western media is of great interest.

The visual framing of migrants and refugees in European media has gained significance and relevance in recent years. From the start of the Arab spring in 2011, various countries have been shaken by serious armed conflicts in the Middle East. One of the main consequences of

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these conflicts is massive displacement of civilians who have been forced to emigrate beyond or within their borders, considerably increasing the number of asylum seekers in just a few years and forcing Europe to confront the largest migration crisis in its recent history. According to the UNHCR (2017) around 10.3 million people were displaced just in that year alone. Among them, 6.9 million were displaced within the borders of their countries and 3.4 million were forced to other regions. The total number of forcibly displaced people in the world at the end of 2016 reached 65.6 million, a 55% increase in just four years. Of these 65.6 million, 22.5 were refugees, 40.3 million were internally displaced persons and 2.8 million were asylum seekers. In 2010 European countries received less than 235 thousand asylum applications; in 2015 their number reached 1.3 million (UNHCR, 2016). Considering such data, it is not surprising that one of the most relevant issues on European political and informative agenda has been called the European and Mediterranean migrant crisis, for all its implications in the Western world.

This study analyses how currently the main European media outlets visually portray displaced people and attempts to construct a typology of the visual frames of migrants and refugees in European media. To do so, content analysis of the images published since the start of the migration crisis related to refugees and/or migrants has been conducted. We expected to find differences in connotative representation of the migrants and refugees in the media in Germany, the Western European country most affected by the wave of migration, as compared to the media in the rest of the countries in the study. We also expected to detect general differences in that coverage between the first period, prior to 2015, and the second one, from 2015 to 2017.

In the following sections, we present the theoretical framework on which this work is based, visual framing; we then review the past studies on the representation of migrants and refugees in Western media; next, we explain the method used in this work; in the following section we describe our findings; and, finally, we present and discuss our conclusions.

1. Visual framing: building reality with images

Researchers have demonstrated on numerous occasions that the media report on events and actors in a specific way, selecting, emphasizing and giving precedence to certain attributes, which suggests that the content of the news is not free from ideological influence (Fahmy, 2010; Gamson et al., 1992; Tuchman, 2002). Along these lines, Entman (1993) defines framing as the 'selection and emphasis of certain aspects of a perceived reality' (p52). This means that the media actively establish the frames of reference that the audience uses to interpret and discuss public events (Tuchman, 2002; Weaver, 2007). But this does not occur only in text, frequently images are used to frame more efficiently, given that the iconic, symbolic and expressive weight of images is much greater than any written text, especially photographs (Mandell & Shaw, 1973; Ramírez, 2011). Messaris and Abraham (2001) believe that when there is a confrontation between a photograph and text, the image usually wins, since it almost always seems nearer the truth. Given the iconic nature of photography, spectators tend to ignore the possibility that the photograph can also be an artificial construction that emphasizes certain elements over others, by using multiple formal and rhetorical resources, such as the framing of the photograph, its selection, cropping, staging or digital retouching, all of which imbue the image with a symbolic and ideological character (Bock, 2017; Rodríguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

In addition, photographs possess other qualities that can make them more persuasive than text when trying to influence audiences. According to Zillmann, Gibson and Sargent (1999), images attract more attention, are easier to interpret and more accessible and enjoyable for the public than discourse, which make them the ideal tool for framing and transmitting ideas

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and perceptions to a spectator who becomes even more susceptible and vulnerable. Meanwhile, Coleman (2010) states that visual images within the news can produce cognitive and emotional effects on the audience more effectively and immediately than words, since it requires less mental effort on the viewer's part, who can have a greater propensity to accept the visual frames without much questioning; although these effects frequently depend on the audience's prior knowledge and feelings regarding the subject. For the same reason, visual frames can also be remembered with greater ease than textual ones (Rodríguez and Dimitrova, 2011), given that the recognition and interpretation of an image does not require prior assimilation of certain representational rules, such as grammar.

Against this background, it is surprising that there are still few studies focused on analysing visual frames. Bock (2017) observed that almost ten thousand scientific articles cite Robert Entman's essay, *Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm* (1993). Of these, according to Elena Palacios (2015), only 17% correspond to work focused on the image as the main subject, although this percentage may have grown over the past year. As indicated by several authors, this gap seems to be due to a certain ambiguity in the conceptualization of visual framing (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Fahmy & Kim, 2008), and to the lack of an established method of identifying visual frames. Given these conceptual and methodological challenges, we find particularly useful the model proposed by Rodríguez and Dimitrova which consists of four levels, each representing a category of 'visual framing that progressively become more sensitive to the assignment of meanings to visual depictions' (Rodríguez & Dimitrova, 2011, 52). The first or denotative level refers to the way in which visuals are framed to represent a specific issue. The second or stylistic-semiotic level refers to how photographic techniques convey different meanings. The third or connotative level refers to frames using visuals as symbols to convey meanings commonly understood within cultural or social contexts. Finally, the fourth level refers to the ideological representations that are transmitted by the visual frame, making certain ideas dominant or emphasizing specific political or ideological points of view.

The clear majority of works studying the image through framing theory only analyse the denotative level, without striving to go further, trying to identify the symbolic reality that is transmitted through the denotative elements. In this work, our intention is to know what representation is implicit in the images of migrants and refugees transmitted by the media, since this connotative depiction will be what directly influences the audience and what will best allow us to define the ideological frames of the fourth level. For this reason, we focus on the third level (*connotative*), in order to identify the ways by which the European media symbolically represent migrants and refugees, and the first level (*denotative*) to describe which denotative elements stand out and to define each of the connotative frames.

2. Migrants and refugees in Western media

Studies indicate that Western media usually depict migrants in a negative and mostly prejudiced way (Igartua et al., 2007; Muñiz et al., 2006; Van Gorp, 2005; Zhang, 2005). In addition, when it regards migrants from North Africa and Middle East, which make up an important part of migrants received by Europe today, the media's treatment is even more negative, as violence and terrorism seem to have become the most representative aspects of a group that is still unknown to the majority of westerners (Kalkan et al., 2009; Corral & Fernández, 2015; Maataoui, 2006; Said, 1997). However, when the figure in the news is specifically a refugee or asylum seeker, no matter what kind, the media coverage today seems to diverge, depending on the media source and the temporal and geographic context (Pantti, 2016). Although it could be expected that images in the European media would tend to objectify and dehumanize refugees (Esses et al., 2008; Nightingale et al., 2017), this premise does not

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hold true in every case. For instance, while in the Austrian media narrative frames associating refugees with a threat to the country's security and economy seem to stand out (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017), the main European media appear to transmit a vision of solidarity in favour of the displaced (López del Ramo & Humanes, 2016); but not all of them and not always. Zhang & Hellmueller (2017) reveal divergences in the visual coverage of the migration coverage presented by *CNN International* and the German media outlet *Der Spiegel* after September 2015, when the photograph of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian boy who died on a Turkish beach, was published, causing a huge international media and psychological impact (Nightingale et al., 2017). According to this study, *CNN International* uses more humanized visual frames of the migration crisis, while *Der Spiegel* diminishes the presence of refugees in its visual coverage, while increasing the presence of police officers, transmitting a perception of threat and the need for control.

These examples reveal the heterogeneity, complexity and variability of the coverage of the migration crisis and its protagonists. Taking for granted the important role the media plays in awaking or diminishing feelings of moral responsibility in Western public opinion (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017), it has been concluded that the two most recurrent frames in the media, both narratively and visually, either represent refugees as victims or as threats; however, the predominance of these frames varies in accordance with the media transmitting the information, demographic characteristics, and even socio-political contexts in different Western countries.

The main objective of this work is to find out how migrants and refugees are depicted in the European media through the selection and emphasis of denotative elements and specific connotative frames during the migration crisis in Europe and the Mediterranean. To this end the following research question was posed:

RQ1: In what way and through what denotative elements and connotative frames have migrants and refugees predominantly been represented in the European media during the European and Mediterranean crisis?

Recent evidence show that the media has played an important role in the migration crisis in the Mediterranean, given its influence over the feelings of Europeans toward migrants and refugees, and its capacity to arouse or diminish feelings of moral responsibility in public opinion (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). In this sense, over the past few years it appears that negative feelings toward displaced people have increased as the migration conflict has worsened, which seems to have been accompanied by media coverage that has changed from what had been presented at the start of the conflict (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018; Esses, Hamilton & Gaucher, 2017). However, this circumstance does not occur in every region equally, but rather the most apprehensive attitudes have developed in the areas most affected by the massive arrival of migrants (Hangartner et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2010).

Therefore, in some cases, associations can be observed between how the displaced are visualized in the media and the prevailing attitudes among citizens (Ferwerda et al., 2017). In this regard, Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) conclude that CNN and *Der Spiegel* diverge in their coverage of the migration crisis, while the German outlet transmits a perception of threat and the need for control, CNN tends to present a more humanist vision. This means that the German publication more frequently circulates a visual frame that represents the refugee as a threat, while CNN more frequently publishes a visual frame that represents the refugee as a victim. The authors also reveal differences in treatment on a temporal scale divided in two stages, one prior to the international publication of the controversial photograph of Aylan Kurdi and another posterior to this event, which occurred in 2015 and was evidence that the migration crisis had taken a turn for the worse that year. Along the lines of these arguments, we formulate the following hypotheses:

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H1. The connotative visual frames of migrants and refugees spread by the European media differ in relation to the degree to which the reference country is affected by the migration crisis. In this sense, German media tend to spread photographs that represent migrants and refugees as a possible burden or threat more frequently than media in the other countries analysed; and they less frequently use photographs that represent migrants and refugees in a positive way or as victims, which tend to be the frames used more frequently in the other countries.

H2. Connotative visual frames of migrants and refugees disseminated by European media differ between the two predefined periods of the migration crisis in Europe and the Mediterranean. During the second period (2015-2017) the photographs tend more frequently to connotatively represent migrants and refugees as possible burdens or threats and less often as victims, compared to the first period (2013-2014).

3. Method

3.1. Data and sample

We used content analysis to examine the visual coverage of European news media during the migration crisis in Europe and the Mediterranean, which is one of the most highly endorsed quantitative tools for analysing news coverage in the media (Wimmer and Dominick, 1994; Neuendorf, 2002). The unit of analysis is every news photograph featuring migrants and refugees (recognized refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants that travel using the same routes) published by the digital version of the selected European news outlets from the start of 2013 to September 2017. Specific media were selected using the following criteria: they had to be general news outlets, have a large distribution, transcendence and influence on Western public opinion, contain different editorial lines, be included in the aggregate news portal *Google News*, use photography prominently in their content, and represent five of the main Western European countries affected by the consequences of the migration crisis, and which stand out as media references due to a greater influence over European and, by extension, Western public opinion; these countries are Germany, Spain, France, Italy and the United Kingdom.

Following the requirements, these news media with online presence and continental transcendence were selected to represent each of the predetermined countries, and the Western world in general:

1. Germany: *Der Spiegel* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*
2. Spain: *El País* and *El Mundo*
3. France: *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*
4. Italy: *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*
5. United Kingdom: *Daily Mail* and *Reuters*.[1]

Once the media outlets were selected, they were examined via Google News using one-year time ranges starting in 2013. We compiled a sample of 500 photographs depicting forcibly displaced people in the 10 digital news media selected (*Table 1*) and tagged with the keywords *refugee* and/or *migrant* in each of the languages of the five reference countries, that is: *flüchtlinge / wanderarbeiter; refugiado / migrante; réfugié / migrateur; rifugiato / migrante; refugee / migrant*.

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Table 1. Distribution of images per media outlet and year

	Year					
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Der Spiegel	10	10	10	10	10	50
Süddeutsche Zeitung	10	10	10	10	10	50
El País	10	10	10	10	10	50
El Mundo	10	10	10	10	10	50
Le Monde	10	10	10	10	10	50
Le Figaro	10	10	10	10	10	50
Corriere della Sera	10	10	10	10	10	50
La Reppublica	10	10	10	10	10	50
Daily Mail	10	10	10	10	10	50
Reuters	10	10	10	10	10	50
Total	100	100	100	100	100	500

Source: *own compilation*

As can be seen in *Table 1*, a total of 10 random images per media outlet and year was collected and 20 random photographs per country and year (50 images total per news outlet, 100 per country), resulting in a sample of 100 annual photographs (from 2013 to 2017), a total of 500 images.

3.2. Measures

The instrument designed for this work was based on the model for identifying visual frames used by Rodríguez and Dimitrova (2011) and had a denotative and connotative focus. The categories and values were defined after evaluating the sample, and based on the coding systems designed by Zhang and Hellmueller (2017), López del Ramo and Humanes (2016) and Muñiz, Igartua and Otero (2006). The following is an outline of the resulting category system:

A) Identification data

1. Basic identification data
    1.1. Image number
    1.2. Code number
    1.3. Country
    1.4. Media outlet
    1.5. Year

B) Denotative analysis of the image (level 1. Rodríguez and Dimitrova, 2011)

2. Denotative analysis of the context
    2.1. Scene
3. Denotative analysis of the characters
    3.1. Number of main actors
    3.2. Actor/s present in the photograph:
    3.2.1. Refugees/migrants, (…), 3.2.7. Others
    3.3. Role main actor/s
4. Denotative analysis of refugees and migrants
    4.1. Gender
    4.2. Age

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4.3. Country of origin
4.4. Physical condition
4.5. Action represented
4.6. Gestural expression:
4.6.1. Happiness, (…), 4.6.23. Boredom
4.7. Religious practice or attitude

C) Connotative analysis of the image (level 3. Rodríguez and Dimitrova, 2011)

5. Analysis of the symbolic reality transmitted by the image
5.1. Implicit representation of the refugee/migrant:
5.1.1. Humble, (…), 5.1.32. Terrorist
5.2. Feeling transmitted by the image

In some cases we calculated new variables using the sum of the dichotomous values that comprise them. This occurred with the following categories: *actor/s present in the photograph*; *gestural expression of the refugee and/or migrant;* and *implicit representation of the refugee and/or migrant*. The *expressions of the refugee and/or migrant* category was agglutinated depending on whether the expressions were *positive, negative (suffering / indignation / anger)* or *neutral*; and the *implicit representations of the refugee and/or migrant* category was organized by whether the representations were *positive* or *negative* (*victim / burden / threat*), values that defined the resulting 4 connotative frames. In the case of *gestural expressions*, since each construct used different *dummy* values, in order to create new variables the average percentage was calculated from each type of expression so they could later be recoded into the same variable by ranges, providing a level of presence of each type of expression, thereby obtaining a *Likert* scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is *no expression* and 5 *many expressions*). In the *implicit representation of the refugee and/or migrant* category (with 32 dichotomous options divided into 4 subsections: *positive / victim / burden / threat*), since each construct had the same number of dichotomous answers (8), it was enough to recode them by ranges (0, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8) within the new variables to achieve the same *ad hoc* scale of 1 to 5 (where *1* is *no implicit representation* and *5* is *very strong implicit representation*).

Later, during the process of obtaining results, the four resulting scales from the four implicit representation frames were again recoded into another eight variables, divided into two time periods (*2013-2014*, *2015-2017*). The variable *year* was also recoded so that it would have only two values corresponding to those two periods. The 31 values of the *action* variable were also recoded by ranges in five new groups by their valence and implicit representation. In sum, the *age* of the refugee and/or migrant variable had to be recoded so that it only had two values (*children* and *adults*); the *gender of the refugee and/or migrant* variable was recoded to obtain only two values (*men* and *women*); the *number of actors* variable to reduce the values to *one/various* and *many* migrants; and the *country* of publication variable, to obtain two analysis groups, one corresponding to Germany and the other to the rest of the countries analysed.

Once the resulting variables were configured, the instrument's reliability was checked. To do so, three judges independently analysed a random sub-sample of 75 photographs (15 from each year), which was 15% of the total sample. Reliability was checked with the KALPHA (Kippendorf's alpha) macro for SPSS, as it is the most recommended reliability measure (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007), and all variables resulted in rates greater than 0.67.

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3.3. Analysis

We carried out descriptive and inferential analysis using IBM SPSS v21. In order to test our hypotheses, we used the Student's *t*-test for independent samples. As normality assumptions for the *t*-test were not satisfied, we performed the bootstrap method with 10000 samples to estimate the standard error and confidence interval for the difference of means. In this manner, we were able to compare the averages of the degree of predominance of each frame, first, between the German media and the other media analysed, and then between the first period and the second period analysed.
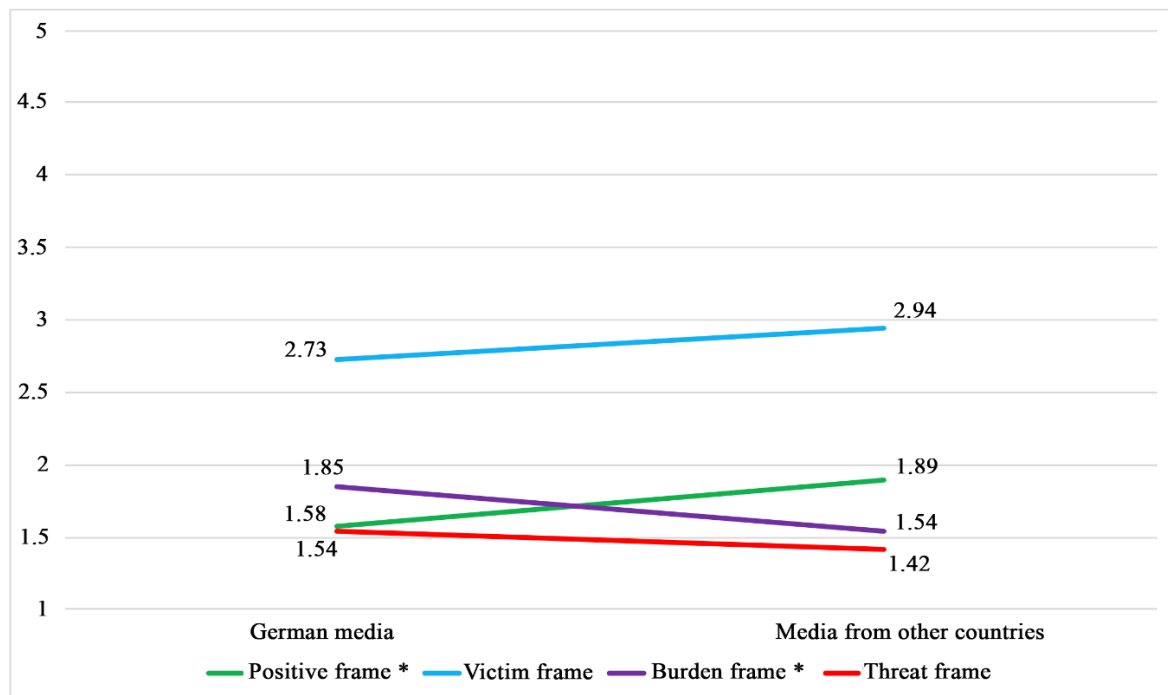
4. Findings

To answer RQ1 a descriptive analysis of the results of the study was carried out. On the denotative level the content analysis revealed that photographs of migrants and refugees published in European media tend to depict them in refugee camps (26.8%), in urban spaces, streets and squares (11.6%), in border areas (9.6%), and on boats or *pateras* (6.8%); they are usually the only actors in the frame, although if they are accompanied by other kinds of subjects, they are mostly law enforcement authorities (13.6%), aid workers (9%) and, on a few occasions, political personalities (1.4%). The migrants and refugees usually appear to be in good physical condition (62.6%), mostly seem to come from North African and the Middle East (83.6%), and tend to be represented in groups of various (50.6%) or many individuals (37.4%), both genders (51%) and diverse ages (54.6%), although images stand out that depict only men (39%) and young people (17.4%), usually males. Regarding the actions represented in the images, the most common show the daily existence and suffering of the refugees and migrants (53.6%), as well as those representing them as victims (16%). Regarding gestural expressions, displays of suffering are most common (76.6%), although, in contrast to what was expected, many photographs reflected positive expressions among the displaced (32.2%). However, there are relatively few images showing some kind of religious manifestation or practice (14.8%), no matter what the faith, although this percentage could be significant given its possible symbolic weight.

Regarding the connotative analysis, we observe that the images of migrants and refugees published in European media mostly represent these individuals as victims (80.6%), although also in a positive way (51%). Slightly less common are photographs depicting them as a possible burden (46.4%) or threat (32.6%). Finally, the results indicate that the general feeling of the photographs is predominantly negative (81.2%), with positive feelings being reported in only 86 images in the sample (17.2%), which seems to indicate that, although the migrants can be represented positively, the general feeling tends to be negative due to the connotations attached to the context.

We also explored differences between the connotative visual frames that predominate in the German media and those found in the rest of the countries in the study (H1); to this end an independent sample *t*-test was carried out to compare the averages of both groups. To formulate this hypothesis, Germany was considered to be the country most affected by the migration crisis in Western Europe, since it has the greatest number of asylum requests in this area. In this sense, H1 stated that, compared to the other countries, the German media more frequently publish photographs that represent migrants and refugees as a possible burden or threat; and less frequently photographs that depict them as victims or in a positive light. In this regard the *t*-test revealed statistically significant differences only for implicitly positive frames [t(185.6)= -3.205, *p*=0.002, *d*=0.333] and frames representing them as a possible burden [t(498)=3.897, *p*=0.000, *d*=0.407] among German media (M=1.58, SD=0.819; M=1.85,

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SD=0.821) and the rest of the countries analysed (M=1.89, SD=1.030; M=1.54, SD=0.696), in both cases the effect size was small (Cohen, 1992).

In either of the other connotative frames, although the results were as expected, the test did not find statistically significant differences. In the frame representing migrants and refugees as victims [t(498)=-1.542, *p*=0.124] the average was slightly lower in the German media (M=2.73, SD=1.196) than in the media from the other countries (M=2.94, SD=1.187), and in the one that represents migrants and refugees as a possible threat [t(498)=1.560, *p*=0.120], as predicted, the average was slightly higher in the German media (M=1.54, SD=0.771) than in the rest (M=1.42, SD=0.703). These differences can be observed in *Figure 1*. H1 can therefore be partially confirmed, since the German media represent migrants and refugees as a possible burden more frequently, and less often in a positive light compared to the other countries in the study.

* Small difference in averages   ** Medium-sized difference in averages   *** Large difference in averages
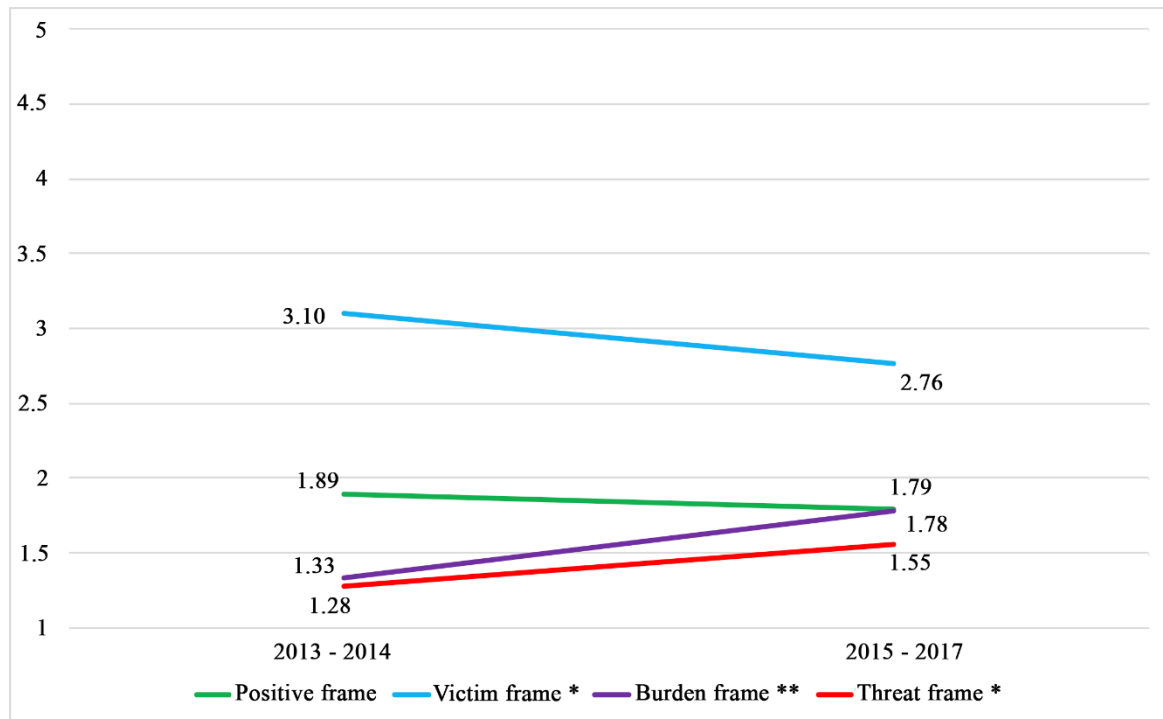
Figure 1. Predominance of the connotative visual frames of migrants and refugees. Comparison between the German media and the media of the other countries analysed
Source: *own data*

Finally, this study sought to find differences in the visual treatment of migrants and refugees in the European media in two pre-defined periods (H2), one at the start of the crisis (2013-2014) and the other when the migration conflict exponentially worsened in Europe (2015-2017). To assess H2 a new, independent samples Student's *t*-test was carried out to differentiate the results of the analysis of the two periods. The test revealed statistically significant differences in the averages for all of the implicit frames studied, except for the positive frame [t(498)=1.134, p=0.257]. Regarding the rest of the frames, all displayed differences between the two-time periods, just as predicted. The frame representing the refugee as a victim [t(498)=3.188, *p*=0.002, *d*=0.288] was predominant in the first period (M=3.10, SD=1.190), compared to the second period (M=2.76, SD=1.173). This can be considered a small difference. Also as expected, the frame representing them as a possible burden [t(498)=-7.130, *p*=0.000, *d*=0.645] was less frequent in the first period (M=1.33, SD=0.687) than in the

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second (M=1.78, SD=0.707). This could be considered a medium-sized difference. And finally, the frame representing them as a possible threat [t(424.81)=-4.263, p=0.000, d=0.382] also confirmed the hypothesis, as it was less common in the first period (M=1.28, SD=0.708) than in the second (M=1.55, SD=0.704). The difference could be considered small. All these differences can be observed in *Figure 2*.

Therefore, H2 was also partially confirmed, because the expected significant differences in the visual treatment of migrants and refugees in the European media were observed in all frames except the positive frame.

* Small difference in averages   ** Medium-sized difference in averages   *** Large difference in averages

Figure 2. Connotative visual frames of migrants and refugees compared between periods
Source: *own data*

Discussions and conclusion

Our objective in this study was to evaluate if the news photographs of migrants and refugees published in the European media transmit specific connotative frames regarding these individuals, thereby conveying a particular symbolic message through deliberately selected and emphasized denotative elements in the image. Empirical analysis confirmed that over time there have been differences in how the European media has treated the visual coverage of the migration crisis and its protagonists, identifying a tipping point in 2015 when the crisis worsened, and also regional differences, in relation to the political, social and demographic contexts of different countries. It was discovered that the German media tends to represent displaced people as a burden or threat more frequently than the media in the other countries analysed. It was revealed that the visual coverage of the migration crisis in the European media has generally changed over the past few years, depicting the displaced in a more negative way as of 2015.

The results of the study make it possible to extract ideological conclusions, associated with the fourth level of analysis of *visual framing* (Rodríguez & Dimitrova, 2011). In this

regard, it can be concluded that the European media does not always provide a rigorous and unbiased visual treatment of the migration conflict shaking Europe, but rather, their coverage often reflects intentions conditioned by diverse factors, whether economic, social, political or demographic. This conjecture is evident in the differences reported by this work in the connotative frames predominant in Germany, the largest receiver of migrants in Western Europe, compared to the other countries we examined, which have been less affected by the migration crisis. This seems to indicate that the media in regions under more pressure from the wave of migration adopt a more biased treatment of the crisis, with a clear interest in showing the displaced people less as victims and more as a burden or threat for Western cultures and societies; in this way, they are able to influence local public opinion and legitimize certain kinds of anti-immigration measures.

In addition to these differences at the geographical level, changes in coverage can also be observed over time, since all the countries analysed show a discreet, gradual shift in the visual coverage, generally increasing the presence of frames that represent the migrants and refugees as a possible burden and/or threat starting in 2015, when the crisis worsened and expanded to all European borders. With this in mind, it seems that over the past few years the work of the European media on this crisis has gone from being merely informative to also being ideologically biased, even propagandistic, to a certain degree. The European media, especially in countries more exposed to the arrival of refugees, seem to have taken a specific stand on an issue of public interest and global concern, with the possible intention of provoking fear and reactivating negative attitudes toward refugees and migrants.

Several reasons can explain this. The first could be sociodemographic, since, to a certain extent, it could be expected that countries that experience greater pressure from migratory flows intend to control these flows and regulate or limit the entry of migrants into their territories. On the other hand, it is known that political and economic factors have a direct influence on the decisions made in the media, and conversely, the media can influence the decisions that are made in politics. In this sense, the rise of right-wing conservative and protectionist political movements across Europe may have influenced the increasingly biased and negative representation that the European media is offering about migrants and refugees, and, in turn, this coverage may be fuelling the rise of these political movements.

Another of the key factors is the economic one. In this case, from the beginning Germany, and later the rest of the countries as the wave of migration reached them directly, has seemed to view these flows as a danger to their economies; but this may have been deliberate. There could be some interest in associating the displaced people with an economic burden, the frame that has experienced greater growth in terms of frequency and predominance in the second period examined.

In this sense, it is convenient to point out the serious consequences that the recent global financial crisis has had on European economies, as well as on social rights, employment and the welfare of citizens and, especially, on certain groups that are usually more vulnerable, such as women, children, and precisely migrants and minorities (Qerimi & Sergi, 2017). This, added to the huge number of cases of corruption that have been exposed throughout the continent during the financial downturn, has fostered a secondary crisis of confidence in the institutions. In recent years, as explained by Danaj, Lazányi and Bilan (2018), European citizens have seen their trust in national and supranational organizations diminished. Meanwhile, distrust towards 'otherness' has grown exponentially, toward those who think differently or have different religions, values and beliefs. Given this conjuncture, both national institutions and the European media may have developed a strategy of representing migrants and refugees as the culprits of all European ills (economic, cultural, security, etc.), focusing distrust more and more on those

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individuals, and thus attempting to remove responsibilities from the national institutions themselves.

And this strategy seems to be based, moreover, on encouraging public opinion to perceive immigrants and refugees as a possible threat, both symbolic, to the cultural values of the host country, and realistic, either to security or to the economies of the European nations. However, it is surprising that it is precisely the media in Germany, one of the countries maintaining a strong economy, which has disseminated more negative positions on refugees, representing them more frequently as an economic burden. It is also surprising that, in general terms, it is in the second period, when the economic recession seems to have passed and economies have begun to recover, when the European media (at the same rate as the institutions), have tended to position themselves in the same way against refugees, increasingly portraying them as a burden.

In short, it seems that the media coverage of the migration crisis and the representation they make of the displaced persons depends, first, on the degree of migratory pressure that a region receives and, second, on economic and social factors, but also on short-term institutional interests.

Limitations

We acknowledge some limitations of this study. Firstly, our results focus on visual framing, which is only a partial representation of the contents elaborated by the media about migrants and refugees. This work should be complemented with other studies focused on the informative texts or even on the relationship between image and text. Secondly, content analysis by itself does not allow for inferences to be made about the real effect of the visual frames on different audiences (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). This implies that future studies may use experimental methodologies with this end. Finally, while a migration crisis in Europe of such magnitude is ongoing we must continue to analyse the representation of migrants and refugees in the Western media with longitudinal studies using larger samples, and also samples from more news media, social media and different countries.

Acknowledgement

Notes

[1] The news agency Reuters, which as the largest international news group is in a category by itself, was selected because it represents the Western media beyond European borders.

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