The Impact of Child Refugee Images on Reader Engagement

Bachelor Thesis
07.06.2019

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Abstract

Photography enables us to better imagine happenings, to put a face on people, to take a closer look at their concerns and to be a witness of events. Different images can have a different influence on the individual. This research looked at the effect photography used in news articles has on readers in terms of reader engagement. Reader engagement incorporates four items: emotional engagement (empathy and sympathy), attentional focus, understanding and presence. The research was placed in the context of the refugee crisis between 2015 and 2016. It compared three news article versions with one including pictures of refugee children, one of refugee adults and one without pictures in order to test whether there is a difference regarding reader engagement. Children are often used in articles as attention-grabbers because of their emotional appeal triggered by their innocence, as proved by previous research. Results showed that when participants were exposed to an article with pictures of children, their emotional engagement, attentional focus, understanding and presence increased.
Introduction

Charlie MacCormack, former president of the international non-governmental organization “Save the Children”, underlined the importance of the choice of photographs when seeking donations. For a picture to trigger response, it has to be placed in a particular frame providing a story to the reader. Direct mail experts noted that when framing a call for donation through child photographs, organizations received more money (Moeller, 2002).

Framing demonstrates the power of communication. In general, framing is used to provide definitions of problems, identify causes, make moral judgments and suggest reactions (Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017). In the newspaper context, it has the ability to manipulate human consciousness by influencing the way readers understand and respond to news articles (Entman, 1993). Primarily, framing is done through selection and salience (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2003; Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017), which influences the reader’s interpretation of a topic. Selection refers to an ideological procedure of choosing which aspects of reality should be reported, depending on the “uniqueness, controversy and perceived significance of the particular event” (Wilmott, 2017 p.70). Further, through salience such aspects are highlighted, stimulating a specific problem perception, interpretation, evaluation or behaviour (Entman, 1993). This procedure is related to the Agenda-setting theory stating that media are able to impact how readers think by highlighting certain topics in a particular frame which make issues appear more important (Ghanem & McCombs, 2001). As Cohen (2015) underlines, apart from influencing reader’s opinion on an event, newspapers have the power to manipulate what topics readers should think about. Therefore, news reports can be seen as constructing our social world (Thompson, 1995).

Framing of the refugee crisis

The construction of our social world is triggered by the diverse interpretations resulting from different media and their framing. Appadurai (1990) called the world shaped by media ‘mediascapes’. Each newspaper enhances a different interpretation of a certain event largely depending on its political orientation. Latour (2007) mentions that studying media frames teaches how the responsibility for the suffering can be shifted, how fears are triggered and how boundaries can be made or unmade. Such framing can have a direct impact on the reader’s understanding and behaviour (Ono & Sloop, 2002). For instance, one of the most reported controversial topics in recent years in Europe has been the migration of asylum seekers referred to as the “refugee crisis”. In 2015, over one million people arrived in the European Union
fleeing from their country because of violence and persecution caused by war. By the end of 2016, approximately 5.2 million refugees and migrants reached Europe. The highest percentage of people came from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (UNHCR, n.d.). The circumstance was framed as a crisis meaning that news reported on it daily, it captured worldwide political attention and received contradictory coverage and responses (Kehr, 2015). The vocabulary used, the stories published and the photographs chosen in the news occupy an important role in shaping the reader’s opinion on the crisis.

Germany counted as one of the EU countries receiving the highest number of refugees between 2015 and 2016. Chancellor Merkel received a high coverage in newspapers and was named as Time Magazine’s Person of the Year because of her leadership role in Europe’s migrant crisis (BBC News, 2015). In Germany, the dichotomy between “Willkommenskultur” (welcoming culture towards refugees) versus xenophobia was mirrored in newspapers’ framing. The main frames found were argumentations on citizen’s responsibilities essentially persuading on the importance of integration, people’s fear of cultural or religious differences and consequences (mainly negative) the crisis might have (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). A report for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees researched the patterns of sourcing, the reference to political parties, and language, explanations and solutions for the refugee crisis in newspapers across five countries. Concerning the terms used, Germany and Sweden mainly used the term “refugee” or “asylum seeker”, Italy and the UK the word “migrant” and Spain primarily “immigrant”. Often “migrant” and “refugee” are used to describe the same people making use of a different framing to distinguishes between those who deserve aid (refugees) and those who do not (migrants) (Huschke, 2014). Such framing influences a reader’s interpretation, for instance, triggers different perceptions on the reason of refugee’s arrival (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016). This might lead to misunderstanding, confusion and negative attitude towards migrants (Gale, 2004).

All in all, research has primarily concentrated on the representation of refugees in texts, underestimating the importance of images as powerful means of communication (Van Schaik, 2016).

**The role of images in the news**

Images manage to express more and quicker information than words such as the setting of events or details like race, ethnicity, class or emotions that might be omitted when writing (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2011). They represent mirrors of reality which raise attitudes and emotions and have the ability to create social visions and identities and shaping relationships.
between groups of people (Cisneros, 2008). As not all events are experienced directly, photography increases the level of involvement with an issue by creating a feeling of participation or witnessing (Graber, 1996). Research argues that one is more likely to feel emotionally involved with a story in a newspaper when it is accompanied by a picture than when solely a text is provided (Cope, Fifrick, Holl, Martin, Nunally, Presto & Tedesco, 2005). This ability to stimulate emotions is unique and may have direct or indirect consequences on the reader’s attitude (Nabi, 2003; Strivers, 1994). Furthermore, images are mostly ideological as through visuo-grammatical properties such as perspective (angle, vectors) and form (colour, shape, lines) only part of the reality is shown (Hart, 2014). Vectors, for instance, demonstrate how actors in an image are situated and direct the viewer in a certain direction. They can let viewers become part of the picture or act as observers (Hart, 2014). Moreover, images give an illusion of consensus (Sontag, 2003) with viewers believing it represents the world as it is, a so-called ‘imagined pseudo-environment’ (Ghanem & McCombs, 2011; Batziou, 2011). Images are evaluated as objective, which enforces credibility and persuasion (Batziou, 2011). Yet, the same picture enables diverse possibilities of interpretations depending on the effect it causes on the viewer and the socio-economic and cultural context in which it appears (Sekula, 1981). For instance, the photographer Connolly (2017) documented a protest titled “Resist Trump – Rally For The 99%: No Ban! No Wall! Stand with Immigrants!” The protest started off peacefully but ended with a confrontation between the police and protestors. The picture showing the confrontation between the police and protestors holding a peace sign up was published by different newspapers. Depending on the newspapers the police intervention was framed positively or negatively. On the one hand, some defended the police as having to intervene to clear the street and protect themselves from the violent demonstrators, on the other hand, some argued that it was a disproportionate use of violence as protestors were being peaceful.

Generally, when text is combined with photography, the information is made more memorable (Graber, 1996) mainly because of the emotions it is able to trigger and the facilitated imagination (Cope et al., 2005). Also, attention and motivation to read the article are increased when containing images, especially if victims or dangerous situations are portrayed (Batziou, 2011). The photography of Aylan Kurdi, a refugee child found dead on a Turkish beach in 2015, triggered an enormous response from citizens across the European Union. Within 12 hours, almost 20 million tweets were generated concerning this picture (Thomas, McGarthy & Smith, 2019). Citizens pressured their government to administer more help and adopt more open and favourable policies regarding refugees. Consequently, the
German government took the decision to introduce policies facilitating the entrance for refugees (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015) and other countries, previously proven to be very much against refugees entering, such as the United Kingdom, accepted to settle 20,000 refugees (Wilmott, 2017).

Prior research studying news reports on asylum seekers has focused on differences between the images used. A large amount highlights the negative metaphors arousing from refugee images with a pattern of dehumanization. Such dehumanization or de-individuation is often achieved by portraying the actors in a group (Hart, 2014). This can have consequences when used frequently as they start defining the public discourse and influence the perception of reality enhancing prejudice, discrimination or even acts of violence (Ross, 2011) because of a misguided image on refugees. Common frames in media are refugees figuring as ‘terrorists’, ‘threat’ or ‘contaminators’ (Esses, Medianu & Lawson, 2013) believing them to invade the country, increase unemployment or create social division. When examining the Guardian, Telegraph and Independent, Wilmott (2017) concluded that predominantly a ‘mass of men’ interacting with the police was portrayed. Such visual dysphemism evokes negative reactions which reinforce discriminatory behaviour (Fernández & Lirola, 2012; Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison & Nicholson, 2013). Here, refugees are simplified into the ‘other’ group building a barrier between the self and the refugee with the police acting as ‘protectors’ from the ‘invaders’ (Wilmott, 2017).

Pictures of crowds, figuring as a homogeneous group, generate less compassion because viewers forget about the distinguishable individuals (Moeller, 2016), which leads to the ignorance of the circumstances causing people to migrate. Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) compared the representation of the refugee crisis of CNN to Der Spiegel, concluding that the former used close-ups more frequently than the latter. CNN made facial expressions more visible, humanizing the arriving contrary to Der Spiegel, which placed refugees in a broader context eliminating the sense of proximity. Consequently, CNN compared to Der Spiegel more likely triggered an emotional response such as compassion (Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017).

In contrast, when using positive frames of refugees a humanitarian frame was highlighted. Humanitarian frames show photos stimulating emotions such as empathy or sympathy but also guilt, encouraging viewers to take action. When photos stimulate emotions, readers are more likely to draw conclusions on events through pictures than descriptions (Elliott, 2011). They are able to pressure politicians and citizens to act, raise funds and encourage humanitarian campaigns. In general, the purpose of such frames is to motivate others to improve the life of the ones worse-off (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015). These examples
addressing the positive and negative representation of asylum seekers through photography demonstrate how selection and emphasis of different aspects shape our understanding and evaluation (Sontag, 2003).

The unique role of children

Children occupy a unique role in humanitarian imagery. Acting as attention-grabbers, children make overexposed or uninteresting topics more relevant and less likely ignored (Dogra, 2012; Moeller, 2002). Moeller (2002) argues this through the hierarchy of innocence. When ranking people from the ones receiving most to the ones receiving least compassion, children represent the highest element followed by pregnant women, teenage girls, elderly women, remaining women, teenage boys and finally men. Absolute innocence is established immediately by children, representing the most obvious victims as their deaths seem impossible to justify. In a crisis, when journalists intend to cause emotional engagement such as guilt, victims should represent innocence and suffering. Consequently, children are used for topics aiming for awareness and a call for morality. Morality, in this case, refers to the story being converted to a story about the type of person the reader is, whether he will respond in a proper or improper manner by for instance helping or not. Such call for morality can be identified in the Kosovo war, where children became the image of the fight for the future of the country without actively being involved in the ‘fighting’ (Moeller, 2002). This also rises to an ethical dilemma questioning such strategic and distorted use of children to stimulate specific responses, because, as Charlie MacCormack states, what makes people respond more than anything is having a child be looking right into their eyes (Moeller, 2000)

Reader engagement

As demonstrated above, each article is framed in a different manner, sometimes making use of images to guide readers in a specific direction. Depending on this direction, readers are informed differently and thus might respond differently to an article. This experience with an article is referred to as reader engagement describing the reader’s involvement with a text (Calder & Malthouse, 2008). Reader engagement has not yet been put in relation with a news article containing images. Previous research mainly concentrated on narrative engagement related to narratives and persuasion where the focus lies on characters and events. However, reader engagement emphasises arguments and evidence constructing a story (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013), consequently, there is a lack of definitions and clarity. In general, engagement is treated as the experience of constructing mental models which happens when readers focus
on understanding the story, lose awareness, pay attention, and become part of the story (Bilandzic, Sukalla, Schnell, Hastall, & Busselle, 2019). It has been treated as a multidimensional concept related to persuasive effects and involvement with the text (Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Involvement is defined through the combination of transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) and identification (Cohen, 2001) which depend on how intensively information is processed (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the emotional relation between the reader and the text (Oatley, 1999). The more intensively a story is processed the more readers care about the outcome (Bilandzic et al., 2019). The transportation-imagery model states that people’s beliefs might change when one is transported by a text (Green & Brock, 2000). Transportation means being caught by the text and immersed into the story. It rises from attention, emotions and imaginative ability and influences the beliefs of the reader. The impact it might subsequently have on the reader’s attitude depends on identification, thus whether the reader adopts the character’s perspectives and emotions. A reader can develop sympathy, empathy or indifference (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010), which is covered within emotional engagement. Furthermore, reader engagement suggests a motive for the reader’s behaviour after reading (Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Depending on the level of transportation and identification different post-reading actions are taken such as forwarding an article or donating to an organization.

For this research, four items are identified to define reader engagement: understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement and presence.

Understanding relates to the realization of the story in the reader’s minds referring to the cognitive and emotional understanding (Oatley, 2002). It discusses the ease of constructing mental models and knowledge-acquisition whilst reading (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). When trying to understand articles in the media by constructing mental models, readers relate the images, the written article and other pieces of information such as the reader’s knowledge to each other (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2011).

Attentional focus is defined as the ability to read an article without being distracted (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). This item relates to the transportation model mentioned above indicating that through attentional focus readers reduce negative cognitive responses, therefore accepting text’s beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000; Unrau & Quirk, 2014).

Emotional engagement describes the feelings of the reader or emotional response triggered by a text (De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders & Beentjes, 2009). It relates to identification with the text (empathy) and affective response (sympathy) (Umrau & Quirk, 2014). Empathy refers to where the reader tries to understand, be aware and sensitive, and experience feelings, thoughts and the journey of someone else (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In this case whether the
reader understands the story by taking the refugee’s perspective (feeling with). Sympathy means understanding the refugee’s emotions but not necessarily sharing them (feeling for) (Oatley, 1995). Emotional engagement leads to a belief change more consistent with the characters’ beliefs in a text (Green, 2004) by understanding the events from a story’s cognitive point of view (Oatley, 1995).

Presence relates to “leaving” the actual world and being immersed by the story, which is the most strongly linked dimension to transportation. It refers to the illusion of “being in another world” motivating readers to spend more time reading (Hakemulder, Kuijpers, Tan, Bálint, & Doicaru, 2017). One can lose track of time or even of oneself (Green, 2004). Both represent the experience of being transported with the latter referring to the loss of one’s own character and feelings by being immersed into the story. In any case, presence is the main trigger of consequences texts might have on beliefs and behaviour (Hakemulder et al., 2017). One example found in a previous study was that by being transported into texts supporting homosexuality readers developed more tolerance towards it (Mazzocco, Green, Sasota & Jones, 2010).

**Research question**

Overall, the refugee crisis was highly covered by newspapers using diverse framings when reporting on refugees. Photographs play a central role in such framing, shaping the reader’s imagination of asylum seekers. Previous research highlighted the unique role of child photographs during a crisis, presuming an influence on the reader’s emotions and attention without actually testing it. Therefore, a research gap emerges when focusing on the actual impact an image of a child versus other images in news articles can have on the reader’s engagement. Such findings could provide deeper and more detailed information on the role of child images in the news. Thus, this research will question:

To what extent does the use of child refugee pictures affect reader engagement in terms of understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement and presence compared to adult refugee pictures or no pictures?

In light of previous research, four different hypotheses emerge:

$H_1$: Understanding is higher when readers are faced with an article containing a child refugee picture than when pictures of adults or no pictures are presented.
**Method**

To answer the research question, an experiment was set up in which participants expressed their reader engagement after having read a text accompanied with either child, adult or no images. Reader engagement was examined through questions regarding each of the four items defining the concept: understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement and presence. It was measured quantitatively through a survey with questions adapted from previous measurements on narrative engagement by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), Green and Brook (2000), Appel et al. (2002) and De Graaf et al., (2009).

**Materials**

To test the difference, one text was used from which three versions were made. Each version contained the same text but different pictures, creating the independent variable picture with three levels: child pictures, adult pictures, no pictures. The text represented an adapted news article on refugees from *The Guardian*, explaining the European Union’s attempt to close a deal over the handling of asylum seekers rescued at sea (see Appendix). The text was modified by eliminating any complicated vocabulary such as “unorganised ad-hoc solutions”, facilitating the reading and avoiding the reader to be too focused on understanding the context. Further, any reference to emotions was removed, making it a factual text, to eliminate the possibility of emotional engagement being caused by the text and not the photographs.

To choose the accompanying pictures a pre-test was performed. Five students studying communication were asked to describe 12 pictures based on the scenario, emotions, people present, action happening and perspective. Based on the description four pairs of pictures were chosen. Each pair represented a similar scenario consisting of one image of children and one
image of adults. When choosing the picture, it was also made sure that different types of
pictures were selected within each text version such as different amount of people present on
the picture, different facial expressions and different settings. The pairs of pictures were then
respectively placed in the same place in the different text versions to keep them as similar as
possible. One text version included four adult pictures, one four child pictures, and one no
pictures (see Appendix).

Subjects
In total, 98 people took part in the experiment. The only selection criterion was to live in a
member state of the European Union.

Out of the 98 participants, 33 (≈34%) were men and 65 (≈66%) were women. Gender was
unequally distributed across text versions ($\chi^2(2) = 6.57, p = .037$).

Concerning the age, 3 respondents (≈3%) were under 18, 74 respondents (≈76%) were
between 18 and 35, 9 respondents (≈9%) were between 35 and 50, and finally 12 respondents
(12.2%) between 50 and 75 years old. Age was distributed equally across text versions ($\chi^2(6) = 6.54, p = .366$).

Furthermore, 3 (≈3%) were Austrian, 3 (≈3%) Belgian, 2 (2%) British, 1 (1%) Bulgarian,
1 (1%) Croatian, 2 (2%) Czech Republican, 1 (1%) Danish, 30 (30.6%) German, 13 (13.2%)
Dutch, 4 (4.1%) French, 2 (2%) Greek, 1 (1%) Hungarian, 4 (4%) Irish, 5 (5.1%) Italian, 1
(1%) Luxembourgian, 2 (2%) Maltese, 3 (3%) Portuguese, 1 (1%) Slovenian, 17 (17.3%)
Spanish and 2 (2%) Swedish. Nationality was equally distributed across text versions ($\chi^2(62) = 55.41, p = .71$).

Finally, when testing participant’s political preference, 81 (82.7%) indicated the European
Union was not doing enough for refugees (e.g. integration) and 17 (17.3%) said it did.
Regarding whether the entering of refugees to the European Union should be more strictly
controlled, 47 (48%) said it should and 51 (52%) said it should not. This question was
ambivalent, as for instance even if a person has a welcoming political stance towards refugees
they might consider it important to more strictly control the arrival of refugees. As the
interpretation of the question could go in several directions, it was not considered in further
analysis. All in all, participant’s political preference was equally distributed across text
versions ($\chi^2(2) = .15, p = .926$).
Design
A between-subjects design with the independent three-level nominal variable picture (child pictures, adult pictures or no pictures) and the dependent variable reader engagement was performed. Each participant was only presented with one of the three text versions. The group of participants exposed to the level “no pictures” acted as a control group to test whether images, in general, have an influence on reader engagement.

Instruments
The interval dependent variable reader engagement comprises the four items described above: understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement (divided into sympathy and empathy) and presence. All of the statements were anchored by a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Understanding was examined using two seven-point Likert scales such as “I could easily follow the events explained in the article” (Appel, Koch, Schreier and Groeben, 2002). The reliability of understanding comprising of two items was poor with Cronbach’s $\alpha = .52$.

Attentional focus was measured using one seven-point Likert-scale with the statement “While reading the article, I found myself thinking about other things” (Appel et al., 2002).

Emotional engagement was divided into empathy and sympathy. Empathy was measured through four five-point Likert scales with statements such as “When reading, I put myself in the position of the refugees” (Graaf et al., 2009). Sympathy was evaluated through two, five-point Likert scales such as “I felt sorry for the refugees shown in the article” (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). The reliability of empathy comprising of four items was excellent with Cronbach’s $\alpha = .96$. The reliability of sympathy comprising of two items was excellent with Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$ as well.

Presence was measured using five seven-point Likert-scales and an example statement was “While reading, I was not drawn into the story of the refugees (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). The reliability of presence comprising of five items was good with Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$.

Finally, a control variable ‘quality of article’ was needed to discard the possibility that different images influenced the perceived quality of the text and thus the response of participants. The variable was measured using a semantic differential scale ranging from “Extremely bad” to “Extremely good” with the question “How would you rate the quality of the text as a journalistic article?”.
Procedure
Through a standard message, sent via social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook, participants were asked to participate in a survey for a Bachelor’s Thesis by clicking on a link. The message started with a rhetorical question (“Are you an EU citizen and able to do me a huge favour?”) to capture participants’ attention and was written in an informal way. It did not explain the aim of the research but stated that they would be debriefed at the end of the survey. Furthermore, anonymity was guaranteed and respondents were explicitly asked to forward the message to obtain more participants. To make sure participants did not spoil others about the content when forwarding, they were asked to keep the content of the survey secret. Each participant responded to the survey individually on their phone or computer and the answers were saved once finished.

Statistical treatment
First, descriptive statistics to find the means for the preliminary questions concerning age, gender, nationality and political preference (see Appendix) were performed. Furthermore, the different questions for each item describing reader engagement were merged to compute four different variables with one mean. For this, the coding had to be reversed for some questions. As the independent variable picture had three levels (child pictures, adult pictures, no pictures), a MANOVA was performed to measure the relation between text type and the four aspects of reader engagement, and a Tukey post-hoc test to locate the exact differences between the conditions. Then, a Chi-square test to examine whether the participant’s political preference influenced the answers was made. Finally, a one-way analysis of variance between the test-variable ‘quality of article’ and text type was performed to test the null hypothesis that the quality did not vary between the texts.

Results
Various tests, starting with a one-way multivariate analysis, were made to analyse the difference between articles containing child refugee pictures, adult refugee pictures or no pictures in terms of its effect on reader engagement. Follow-up tests were made to discard any other external factors which might have influenced the differences found.
A one-way multivariate analysis for Sympathy, Empathy, Understanding, Attentional Focus and Presence, with picture as factor, found a significant multivariate effect of picture ($F_{(10,182)} = 17.28$, $p < .001$). The univariate analyses showed an effect of picture on Sympathy ($F_{(2,95)} = 64.83$, $p < .001$), Empathy ($F_{(2,95)} = 62.79$, $p < .001$), Understanding ($F_{(2,95)} = 20.43$, $p < .001$), Attentional Focus ($F_{(2,95)} = 54.64$, $p < .001$), and Presence ($F_{(1,2)} = 74.65$, $p < .001$). Child pictures were more likely to trigger Sympathy ($M = 6.15$, $SD = .98$), Empathy ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.07$), Understanding ($M = 6.08$, $SD = .68$), Attentional Focus ($M = 5.70$, $SD = .99$), and Presence ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.08$) than adult pictures (Sympathy: $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.27$; Empathy: $M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.41$; Understanding: $M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.04$; Attentional focus: $M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.56$; Presence: $M = 3.15$, $SD = .76$) or no pictures (Sympathy: $M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.43$; Empathy: $M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.21$; Understanding: $M = 4.85$, $SD = .90$; Attentional focus: $M = 2.83$, $SD = .83$; Presence: $M = 2.67$, $SD = .89$) (see Table 1-6). Additionally, adult pictures triggered more Sympathy ($p < .001$) (see Table 2) and Attentional focus ($p = .015$) (see Table 5) than no pictures. However, there was no significant difference between adult pictures and no pictures regarding Empathy ($p = .119$) (see Table 3), Understanding ($p = .823$) (see Table 4) and Presence ($p = .113$) (see Table 6).

Table 1. Mean, standard deviations for Sympathy, Empathy, Understanding, Attentional focus and Presence per text version (no pictures, adult pictures, child pictures)

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1 $1 = \text{strongly disagree}$, $2 = \text{disagree}$, $3 = \text{somewhat disagree}$, $4 = \text{neither agree nor disagree}$, $5 = \text{somewhat agree}$, $6 = \text{agree}$, $7 = \text{strongly agree}$
Table 2. MANOVA Tukey Post-hoc p-value for the effect of picture on Sympathy

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Table 3. MANOVA Tukey Post-hoc p-value for the effect of picture on Empathy

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Table 4. MANOVA Tukey Post-hoc p-value for the effect of picture on Understanding

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Table 5. MANOVA Tukey Post-hoc p-value for the effect of picture on Attentional Focus

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Table 6. MANOVA Tukey Post-hoc p-value for the effect of picture on Presence

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<td>No pictures</td>
<td>.113</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult pictures</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child pictures</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Chi-square test showed no significant relation between political preference and picture \( \chi^2(2) = .84, p = .66 \).

A one-way analysis of variance showed no significant effect of picture on quality of the text \( F(2, 95) = 1.20, p = .306 \). The quality of the article with child pictures \( (M = 5.27, SD = 1.07) \) was not rated differently than the article with no pictures \( (M = 4.87, SD = 1.33) \), or adult pictures \( (M = 5.26, SD = 1.13) \).

Conclusion and discussion

Conclusion

Through an experiment, this research tested to what extent the use of child refugee pictures in newspaper articles affected reader engagement in terms of understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement and presence compared to adult refugee pictures or no pictures. All four hypotheses concerning this difference were accepted, thus demonstrating a significant difference between newspapers containing child refugee pictures compared to adult refugee pictures or no pictures. Newspaper articles with child refugee images trigger a higher reader engagement than newspaper articles with adult refugee pictures or no pictures. In general, there was also a higher Attentional Focus and Sympathy when presented to adult refugee pictures compared to no pictures but no difference was found for Empathy, Understanding and Presence. Moreover, the political preference did not influence reader engagement as no difference was found in the rating depending on whether the participants were open to refugees arriving or not. Finally, the perceived quality of the article did also not differ depending on which and whether photographs were displayed or not.

Discussion

The results showed that this research was roughly in line with previous findings arguing that pictures have an influence on the reader. When faced with photography, particularly child photography, participants showed a higher reader engagement measured through emotional engagement, understanding, attentional focus and presence. Thus, all four hypotheses were confirmed. However, surprisingly adult pictures did not have the same influence on all aspects compared to no pictures.

Understanding was higher when readers were faced with a text including child refugee pictures than with a text including adult refugee or no pictures. Understanding was measured
as estimated understanding only questioning participants on their understanding of the text and refugee’s actions but not actually testing it. The Cronbach’s alpha, in this case, was not sufficient as the questions, on the one hand, were about understanding the text and on the other on the handling of refugees, which is not necessarily rated equally. The lack of difference between understanding of the text without pictures and with adult pictures contradicts previous research claiming that images increase understanding through their better representation of events which facilitates the imagination and enhances involvement (Cope et al., 2005). This might be justified by the fact that the text was relatively easy to read and the questions addressing the positioning towards asylum seekers was not necessarily related to the text but more with one’s personal opinion. Furthermore, participants who did not see images had probably been confronted with refugee images before which enabled them to imagine the situation anyways. Future research should re-examine this aspect. Regarding children, the higher understanding compared to adult or no pictures might be explained through the increase in attention discussed in the following paragraph. As children are shown, the reader might explicitly pay attention (Dogra, 2012; Moeller, 2002) to the article and devote more effort into finding out the reasons for the state of being of the portrayed children. Furthermore, motivation to read is said to increase (Batziou, 2011) when seeing pictures of children which might also encourage comprehension. Besides, understanding comprises emotional understanding which refers to being able to process and sympathize or empathize with the displayed emotions (Oatley, 2002). As the paragraph below on emotional engagement examines, this is more evident when seeing children which again supports the results found for this dimension.

Attentional focus was higher when readers were faced with a text including child refugee pictures than with a text including adult or no pictures. Previous research has proven that photography is able to capture the attention of the reader (Graber, 1996; Batziou, 2011). Especially photography portraying dangerous situations stimulates attention (Batziou, 2011) such as refugees facing threatening situations like crossing the Mediterranean. In line with this, the news article containing pictures (children or adult) scored higher in attention than the one without. Additionally, articles accompanied by child images achieved the highest attention showing how children indeed act as attention-grabbers as they have the ability to make topics more interesting (Dogra, 2012; Moeller, 2002). Moreover, another explanation for the difference is that when portraying victims, attention is also increased and as Moeller (2002) argues, children are the most obvious victims.

Emotional engagement was higher when readers were faced with a text including child refugee pictures than with a text including adult or no pictures. Emotional engagement was
measured in sympathy and empathy. In general, images evoked more sympathy. Yet, there was only a significant difference for empathy between child pictures and adult pictures or no pictures but not between adult pictures and no pictures. The latter partly refutes previous research stating that images trigger a higher emotional engagement through aided imagination and the unique power to evoke emotions (Nabi, 2003) An explanation for this could be that empathy goes beyond sympathy as it is more difficult to feel and therefore highly depends on the images but also the reader’s personality (Kate, Gauri, Pooja, Nikhilesh & Rupal, n.d.). Furthermore, the refugee crisis was highly covered by newspapers in the last years, often through negative framing. Such framing, for instance using dysphemism (Fernández & Lirola, 2012; Bleiker et al., 2013), might have already established a societal discourse and be deep-routed within reader’s mental models, thus discouraging empathy for adult refugees. The significant differences found for children possibly relates to the concept of the hierarchy of innocence (Moeller, 2002). Here, children receive the most compassion and represent the most obvious victims. Finally, children are known to represent the future which society wants to protect and help. They might represent a more delicate topic where it is troublesome for journalists to find negative connotations and use a negative framing which establishes a societal discourse of children deserving sympathy and empathy.

Presence was higher when readers were faced with a text including child refugee pictures than with a text including adult or no pictures. It closely relates to transportation which is influenced by many different factors such as relevance for own life or counterfactual thinking (Dal Cin, Zanna & Fong, 2013) which might explain why there was no difference found between adult pictures and no pictures. Most of the EU-citizens do not directly experience the refugee crisis, so photography enables them to become more involved by imagining the different situations and reflecting on them. However, in this case, only child pictures achieved this which might again relate to the matter of the participants not being exposed to refugee images for the first time. Hence, they are able to recall previously seen images and do not need new stimuli. With regard to children, they do not carry any fault in the happening but nevertheless suffer and face an unknown future, this might lead participants to more extensively question how such events are possible. Consequently, they become more involved with the issue and presence is increased.

The hypotheses arguing that child refugee images reinforce reader engagement were strengthened by the fact that neither participant’s political preference nor quality had a significant effect on reader engagement.
All in all, the choice of framing with respect to pictures is proven to strongly influence readers’ response to an article. It has the ability to construct our social world by defining for instance how emotionally engaged we feel with respect to a group of people.

The research had several strengths; participants came from many different EU countries, the research linked reader engagement to photography which is an area lacking research and it addressed a topic which is relevant in people’s everyday life, as news is everywhere. Nevertheless, it also had some weaknesses which limit the study. Firstly, there was an unequal distribution between the number of participants from different nationalities with a high representation of Germany and Spain but low representation of eastern Europe for instance. Secondly, as photography related to reader engagement has not been researched sufficiently it leads to a very general approach which consequently misses detail such as differences within pictures of the same category. There are many options regarding the choice of images making it difficult to generalize findings. In this case, different types of pictures were used so it remains unknown how each picture influenced reader engagement. Thirdly, regarding the method, it took a quantitative approach, which makes it difficult to perceive the context of the phenomenon and the individual experiences. Besides, reader engagement was only measured using one type of text which was fact-based so it remains unknown whether with another type of text the same results would have been obtained. Furthermore, there was no control over the environment when participants answered the survey. This might have influenced the results, for instance, if a participant found him- or herself in a stressful situation he/she might have been distracted and consequently might have rated his/her attention and understanding lower. Similarly, participants might have responded to the questions over a longer period which could have led to the pictures and text being less present in their mind and thus a lower rating on presence and emotional engagement.

The findings of this research add valuable information to existing research on images as this is an underrepresented research area. Future research could build up on these findings and try to gain a deeper understanding especially considering that not all results were in line with previous findings. As mentioned above, there are many options when choosing photography. A possibility would be to test reader engagement with explicit types of pictures. For instance, the difference in reader engagement when only seeing children from close versus from far or alone versus in a group. Another possibility for further research would be to focus more closely on the difference between participant characteristics such as nationality or gender to see what effect these have on the response. In this case, reader engagement was tested in the frame of the refugee crisis which can be rated as an emotionally intense but also very familiar
topic, further research could do the same experiment with another topic. Moreover, the different items defining reader engagement might correlate between each other in different ways which would be interesting to consider more closely.

When studying media, the focus mostly lies on text, ignoring the power of illustrations and photography. Over the years, photographers have reported and educated people on the most important matters our society faces. For instance; war, famine, child labour or injustices encountered by asylum seekers are all issues that were portrayed by photography (Franklin, 2015). In our informationally loaded world, pictures are advantageous to make events more salient with the help of framing and to evoke emotions which cannot be achieved by text only (Nabi, 2003). The current research opened up a new field demonstrating how reader engagement is influenced by pictures implying that journalists need to be conscious of their choices of images taking into account the differences but also ethical dilemma. Using children to report on a topic can on one hand push society to act against injustices but on the other hand, it might give a distorted picture or be used for inadequate purposes. Generally, readers might be aware of the possibility of framing or editing photography but are often, even if unconsciously, deceived by it anyways. Such awareness should motivate journalists to always try to give the most accurate representation of events taking into account the responses they are able to trigger through their reporting. They should recognize their ethical responsibility to report truthfully without trying to deceive the reader. Finally, the refugee crisis was constantly used for propaganda purposes in politics. In such cases, photography was a powerful tool to underline politician’s discourse and shape people’s opinion. This research again highlights the significance of taking a critical stand when reading the news. It is important to be cautious when basing one’s own opinion on photography, mostly done unconsciously, because there is always a purpose when choosing what aspects to highlight.
References


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EU seeks temporary deal over refugees and migrants rescued at sea
Commissioner calls end to ad-hoc solutions after latest delay in letting ships dock

Jennifer Rankin in Brussels

The European Union is attempting to agree on a temporary deal on the handling of migrants and refugees rescued at sea. Plans are studied to manage rescue boats, after a series of incidents in which these were unable to dock in any Mediterranean port. The latest case concerned 49 people who were at sea for almost three weeks on-board of two German NGO ships, SeaWatch 3 and Sea Eye. They were allowed to disembark in Malta after a deal was struck to disperse them among eight EU member states. The European commissioner for migration characterized this incident as shameful and demanded solutions. The commissioner called for temporary arrangements ensuring solidarity with the most exposed EU countries until the new Dublin regulation becomes applicable. The Dublin regulation is a draft EU asylum law proposing quotas to distribute asylum seekers. The latest idea for a temporary fix does not include fair distribution but funds to return refused asylum claimants to their home countries.

The plan has backing from around 10 member states but has run into opposition from Hungary, which argues that the policy would encourage more people to attempt the sea crossing. For this plan to be approved unanimity needs to be reached. Since ports were closed for NGO rescue boats, EU countries are struggling every time a boat arrives. The delays damage those on board and the EU’s credibility. As the number of people arriving has declined, the incentive to reach an agreement or deal is also becoming less urgent.
Article used for the survey with adult pictures – adapted from The Guardian (Rankin, 2019)

EU seeks temporary deal over refugees and migrants rescued at sea
Adapted from the original by Jennifer Rankin from the Guardian

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Since ports were closed for NGO rescue boats, EU countries are struggling every time a boat arrives. The delays damage those on board and the EU’s credibility. As the number of people arriving has declined, the incentive to reach an agreement or deal is also becoming less urgent. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that humans are still fleeing war and often drowning on their way.
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The Impact Of Child Refugee Images on Reader Engagement
Andrea Cuello i Castell

Images used for the survey

Pair 1.

Figure 1. [Online image] (2015)  
Figure 2. [Online image] (2016)

Pair 2.

Figure 3. Paduano (2017)  
Figure 4. Getty image (n.d.)

Pair 3.

Figure 5. Reuters (2015)  
Figure 6. Konstantinidis (2015)

Pair 4.

Figure 7. Getty images (2018)  
Figure 8. BBC News (2016)
The Impact Of Child Refugee Images on Reader Engagement Andrea Cuello i Castell


Figure 2 – Gadzo (2015). Two children are screaming while getting out of the water [Online image]. Retrieved March 2, 2019 from https://www.middleasteye.net/opinion/canada-complicit-refugee-crisis


Figure 6 – Konstantinidis (2015). Syrian and Afghan refugees fall into the sea after their dinghy deflated some 100m away before reaching the Greek island of Lesbos. Retrieved March 2, 2019 from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-greece-drowning/babies-children-drown-as-migrant-boat-capsizes-off-greek-island-idUSKCN0RD0K20150913

Figure 7 – Getty image (2018). A report alleges Syrian refugee women were forced to exchange sex for UN aid. Retrieved March 2, 2019 from https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/world/2018/02/syrian-refugees-reportedly-forced-into-sex-for-un-aid.html

Questionnaire

Preliminary Questions

- How old are you? (below 18/18-25/35-59/50-75/above 75)
- Please indicate your gender (female/male/I would prefer not to specify)
- What is your nationality?
- Do you think the European Union is doing enough for refugees? (e.g. integration) (yes/no)
- Do you think the entering of refugees to the European Union should be more strictly controlled? (yes/no)

Emotional Engagement

Empathy

1. While reading, I felt what refugees were going through emotionally (Cohen, 2001)
2. While reading, I put myself in the position of the refugees (De Graaf et al., 2009)
3. While reading, I was affected emotionally (Green & Brock, 2000)
4. While reading I felt as if I experienced the events happening to refugees along with them (De Graaf et al., 2009)

Sympathy

1. I felt sorry for the refugees discussed in the article (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009)
2. I felt worried for the refugees discussed in the article (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009)

Understanding

1. I could easily follow the events explained in the article (Appel et al., 2002)
2. It is difficult for me to understand why refugees take risks to come to the European Union (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009)

Attentional focus

1. While reading the article, I found myself thinking about other things (Appel et al., 2002)

Presence

1. The article seemed to drag (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009)
2. While reading the article, I forgot I was answering a questionnaire (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009)
3. While reading, I was not drawn into the story of the refugees (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009)
4. While reading, I found myself thinking of ways the events could have turned out differently concerning the handling of refugees (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009)
5. The events in the article are relevant to my everyday life (Green & Brock, 2000)
Appendix A. Statement of own work

Print and sign this Statement of own work form and add it as the last appendix in the final version of the Bachelor’s thesis that is submitted as a hard copy to the first supervisor.

Student name: Andrea Cuello i Castell
Student number: s4752694

PLAGIARISM is the presentation by a student of an assignment or piece of work which has in fact been copied in whole or in part from another student’s work, or from any other source (e.g. published books or periodicals or material from Internet sites), without due acknowledgement in the text.

DECLARATION:

a. I hereby declare that I am familiar with the faculty manual (http://www.ru.nl/stip/english/rules-regulations/fraud-plagiarism/) and with Article 16 “Fraud and plagiarism” in the Education and Examination Regulations for the Bachelor’s programme of Communication and Information Studies.

b. I also declare that I have only submitted text written in my own words.

c. I certify that this thesis is my own work and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation, whether they be books, articles, reports, lecture notes, and any other kind of document, electronic or personal communication.

Signature: [Signature]

Place and date: Nijmegen, 7th of June 2019