

Perceived Inequality in Refugee Reception: University Students on the 'Double Standard'



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Preface

Dear reader,

I am proud to present my thesis called “Perceived Inequality in Refugee Reception: University Students on the 'Double Standard.’” With the writing of the thesis I have almost finished my bachelor’s degree in Geography, Planning and Environment. The past months have been a period in which I have worked intensely on my research in which I have applied my knowledge I have gained from my study.

The subject of this research is something that I find really important. Through the travels of which I had the pleasure of experiencing, I have seen many forms of inequality and poverty which have changed the way I look at the world. Those experiences created a sense of justice, in which I strive for equality and well-being for all people, but especially migrants, refugees and other marginalized groups. I hope that I can contribute to this in my professional career.

Throughout the process of my research, I have continuously relied on valuable support and feedback. For this I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Amalia Gilodi. Thank you for your availability for all my questions during the writing of my thesis. I would also like to thank all the respondents who were willing and took time to participate in my research. And lastly, I would like to thank my family, girlfriend and friends for their mental support and feedback during this process. All of this help has contributed to the thesis that now lies in front of you.

I hope you will enjoy reading my thesis.

Eric Cramer

Abstract

This bachelor thesis examines how university students perceive the 'double standard' in refugee reception. This is a term that is used to describe the unequal treatment of different refugee groups based on their origin, appearance, religion or cultural background. The topic became especially relevant after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, when it became clear that Ukrainian refugees were being received far more warmly and with less bureaucratic procedures than refugees from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan or Eritrea. This difference in treatment caused questions about fairness, cultural bias and political influence in the treatment of people who are seeking protection.

The aim of this research was to understand how university students interpret this difference and what social, cultural and informational factors shape their views. To explore this, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with students at Radboud University. These students had a wide variety of academic backgrounds. The interviews focused on students' perceptions of refugee reception in the Netherlands, their understanding of public opinion, their trust in media coverage and their broader moral and emotional reflections on the issue.

The data were analyzed by using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The theoretical framework combines Framing Theory (Dennison, 2021), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and McCloskey's (2022) concept of the "Hierarchy of Victims," which together help to explain how narratives about refugees are constructed and internalized.

There were three main themes identified. The first one is *Student Perspectives on Refugee Reception*. This explored the internal reasoning of students, the emotional discomfort and their views on fairness. Many participants expressed a strong sense of moral injustice towards the unequal treatment of different refugee groups. They acknowledged that cultural familiarity made it easier to empathize with Ukrainian refugees, but they also criticized this tendency as ethically problematic.

The second theme is *Perceived Public Opinion*. This showed how students interpret dominant societal views. Many described that public attitudes were influenced by fear, misinformation and stereotypes, especially towards non-European refugees. Students noticed a clear cultural bias in public sentiment, which was often reinforced by a lack of education and limited contact with different refugee groups. Some participants were sympathetic to these influences, while others showed disappointment or frustration.

The third theme is *Media as a Framing Force*. This focused on how students perceive the media's role in reinforcing or challenging the 'double standard.' Most participants agreed that the media plays an important role in shaping public perceptions of refugees by framing Ukrainian refugees as culturally close and deserving, while portraying other refugee groups as distant or problematic. The selective visibility of certain refugee groups was seen as a key factor in the construction of a hierarchy of victims.

Overall, this research shows that university students are highly aware of the unequal treatment of refugee groups and that they often experience moral tensions when forming

their own attitudes. While they recognize the influence cultural proximity and media framing, they also show the ability to reflect critically on these dynamics and challenge them when necessary.

This thesis contributes to the broader academic discussion on migration, social identity and public discourse by showing the voices of young, educated individuals who are not only affected by but also actively engaged in understanding the complex dynamics of refugee reception in Europe.

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1. Introduction

Following the 2022 Russian invasion the amount of solidarity in Europe for the reception of Ukrainian refugees has grown massively, with millions of displaced Ukrainians receiving immediate access to temporary protection, employment rights and social services. However, this open and welcoming response has also highlighted a distinct contrast with the treatment of other refugee populations, especially those from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. These refugees have to face restrictive border policies, long asylum procedures and have limited rights. This difference in treatment has led to growing academic attention to what scholars have termed a 'double standard' in refugee reception. The 'double standard' is an occurrence where factors such as race, religion, cultural proximity and geopolitical interests appear to have an influence on both public attitudes and institutional responses toward different refugee groups.

An increasing amount of research has documented this occurrence across multiple dimensions, hereby revealing its complex institutional, discursive and social displays. Scholars have analyzed how the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive by the European Union provided immediate rights and freedoms for Ukrainian refugees that in the past have been denied to other refugee populations. The Temporary Protection Directive, activated on March 4, 2022, grants immediate protection to individuals fleeing the conflict in Ukraine, offering them rights such as residence permits, access to employment, and social services (European Union, 2023). This raises questions about the legal consistency and principled application of asylum frameworks (Kienast, Feith Tan, and Vedsted-Hansen, 2023). Research about how the 'double standard' is implemented locally has shown how civil society organizations and municipal authorities deal with these policy hierarchies in practice, by often giving differential treatment through day-to-day service provision while at the same time struggling with moral tensions about selective solidarity (Bolzoni, Donatiello, and Giannetto, 2023).

Other studies have revealed how different refugee movements are visually constructed in public discourse. Research on media cartography demonstrates that migration from the Global South is usually portrayed in a militaristic way, by using thick red arrows that resemble invasions. This portrays refugee movements as perceived threats, while these methods have not been used for Ukrainian refugee movements. This causes a very different visualization of different refugee groups (Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2019). This differential framing leads to broader cultural narratives, where scholars have identified a "hierarchy of victims" in which proximity to European identity, whiteness and Christianity appears to determine levels of public empathy and political support (McCloskey, 2022). These narrative frameworks do not only influence public opinion but they also influence policy implementation, which leads to a vicious circle between cultural perceptions and institutional responses.

Remarkably, research has revealed that the 'double standard' even operates within spaces that are committed to refugee advocacy. Studies of solidarity movements have shown that there are internal tensions between universalist approaches advocating equal treatment for

all refugees and particularist positions that prioritize support for specific groups, especially Ukrainians (Carlsen and Toubøl, 2023). These findings suggest that differential treatment is caused by deeper, unconscious biases about deservingness that go beyond anti-immigrant attitudes that challenge assumptions about who supports refugee rights and why.

This body of research demonstrates that the 'double standard' in refugee reception is a well-documented occurrence with complex institutional, discursive and social dimensions. However, research also shows that the 'double standard' is not simply a policy phenomenon but that it is a challenging concept that can be interpreted through multiple lenses, such as unjust discrimination, as a practical governance response to different circumstances or as a legitimate prioritization which is based on cultural or political factors. These different interpretations suggest that public perceptions of differential refugee treatment can be very different across different populations and contexts.

University students represent a valuable population for investigating these perceptual dynamics for multiple reasons. As growing adults who are in their formative years, students are actively developing their political identities, moral frameworks and social attitudes. This makes their perspectives especially interesting, because it shows how the next generation of policymakers, professionals, journalists, educators and society leaders will approach questions of refugee reception and solidarity.

Students may agree with critiques of injustice and racism or they may justify the difference as an issue of policy pragmatism, cultural familiarity or political necessity. Others may not be aware of the double standard at all. Investigating these diverse perspectives offers valuable insights into how young, educated individuals perceive fairness, deservingness and solidarity in the context of refugee reception.

1.1 Research Gap

The existing research has extensively examined, legal, political and media-related aspects of refugee reception, by documenting the differential treatment through various analytical lenses. Scholars have analyzed the legal frameworks and their selective application (Kienast, Feith Tan, & Vedsted-Hansen, 2023), investigated institutional and society responses (Bolzoni, Donatiello, & Giannetto, 2023), examined visual and symbolic representations in the media (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2019) and explored narrative construction processes (Dennison, 2024). However, there still remains a significant gap in understanding how different population groups perceive the fairness and legitimacy of such differences in refugee treatment.

The 'double standard' in refugee reception has mostly been framed within critical academic and policy discourses, with scholars mainly analyzing it as a problematic phenomenon that shows underlying biases and contradictions in European humanitarian governance. While this critical perspective has been important in documenting and theorizing the issue, there is much less knowledge about how it is perceived, interpreted and evaluated in different layers

of the general population, especially among young, educated adults who are in the process of forming their political and ethical worldviews.

University students represent an important yet underexplored demographic in this context. As individuals aged between 18-25, they are at an important stage where attitudes towards social justice, human rights and international solidarity are being formed (Jennings & Niemi, 1981). Unlike other adults whose political attitudes may be more firmly established, university students are actively exposed to diverse sources of information. They engage in critical thinking exercises and they participate in environments that encourage the questioning of the current norms and assumptions. This unique position makes their perspectives especially valuable for understanding how the 'double standard' discourse is received and interpreted by younger generations.

University students often actively participate in political and social discussions, within both academic settings and through social media platforms, which makes them influential in shaping broader public discourse. Their views and interpretations can have big implications for future policy directions, because they represent the next generation of policymakers, professionals, journalists, educators and society leaders. Despite this influence, their perspectives on the issue of differential refugee reception remains largely underexplored in academic literature.

There are a couple studies that have researched public attitudes towards refugee reception, but they have generally focused on general population surveys or specific demographic groups, which were defined by age, education or political affiliation (Abdelaaty & Steele, 2022). However they have not specifically investigated how university students, with their unique exposure to academic discourse, diverse networks and developmental stage, interpret the difficulties of refugee policy. This is an oversight, because understanding university students' perspectives can offer valuable insights into broader societal attitudes, the effect of different strategies and the potential for future public engagement with refugee issues.

The university context alone provides an unique lens through which to look into these perceptions. Universities are spaces where students face multiple, competing narratives about global issues, where they are encouraged to develop critical thinking skills. It is also a place where they interact with peers from different and diverse backgrounds and perspectives. This environment may lead to more nuanced or varied interpretations of the 'double standard' than might be found in other population groups. It might potentially reveal new dimensions of how differential treatment is perceived and evaluated.

1.2 Research Goal

The objective of this research is to examine how university students perceive and interpret the 'double standard' in refugee reception. This is done by focusing on the differential treatment between Ukrainian refugees and the refugees from the Global South. This study

aims to identify the perceptions of the students by considering factors such as media coverage, public attitudes and policies.

The Temporary Protection Directive, which was activated on March 4, 2022, grants immediate protection to individuals fleeing the war in Ukraine, offering them rights such as residence permits, access to employment and social services (European Union, 2023). This directive was designed to provide swift assistance without overburdening national asylum systems, says Luyten (2022). However, this preferential treatment has raised questions about a potential "hierarchy of victims," where refugees from other regions may not receive comparable support (McCloskey, 2022).

Media representations have also played a significant role in shaping public perceptions. Studies indicate that Ukrainian refugees have been portrayed more sympathetically compared to refugees from the Middle East or Africa, which potentially influenced public attitudes and policy decisions. By discussing media narratives, public opinion and refugee policies, this research aims to discover whether university students also notice and consider these factors into their opinion.

The research addresses a critical gap in understanding how young, educated individuals, who represent the next generation of policymakers, professionals and active citizens, conceptualize and evaluate the moral, legal and political factors of refugee reception. While literature has documented the existence of differential treatment (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2019; Carlsen & Toubøl, 2023), there remains limited empirical understanding of how university students perceive these differences.

To achieve this research goal, this study is led by the following research question: **How do university students perceive the 'double standard' in refugee reception?** This question operationalizes the research goal by focusing on awareness, understanding and evaluation of students of differential treatment patterns. The research question is broken down into multiple dimensions: whether students recognize differences in refugee reception, how they interpret and explain these differences, what factors they believe influence differential treatment and how they morally think about such differences. By looking into these dimensions, this study will provide empirical insights into how university students understand the differences in refugee treatment in Europe.

1.3 Societal Relevance

The way different refugee groups are received in Europe has become one of the biggest discussion points in European politics and society, especially since the arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees in 2022. Some view the quicker and more preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees as a necessary response to a nearby war and humanitarian crisis, while others see it as a clear example of inequalities within European migration policy. These inequalities are based on race, culture or geopolitical interests (Bolzoni et al., 2023; Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2019). This debate has huge implications for not only the

millions of displaced people who are seeking protection, but also for the fundamental values and identity of European society itself.

Public attitudes have an important role in policy decisions in democratic societies. In addition to following legal frameworks and administrative procedures, the reception of refugees is also influenced by public opinion, media discourse and societal pressure (Dennison, 2024). If the support for specific refugee groups is high, as has been the case with Ukrainian refugees, governments can implement more loose policies with relative ease. On the other hand, when the public sentiment is hostile or not welcoming, as has been the case with refugees from Africa or the Middle East, more restrictive policies can be implemented.

University students, who are highly educated and socially engaged, often participate in an active way in these public debates and they represent the future decision-makers and professionals. Their perspectives today will likely have an influence on the policy landscape of tomorrow, because they are likely to get roles in government, media, education and other sectors that shape public discourse and policy formation. Also, university students are often opinion leaders within their networks and communities, so their influence is even bigger than you can see in direct numbers.

Understanding how students perceive the 'double standard' in refugee reception can offer valuable insights into wider societal beliefs and attitudes that go further than refugee policy itself. Their views can help understand how essential concepts such as justice, fairness and humanitarianism are understood in modern society and where tensions or contradictions exist between stated values and practical policies. This understanding is very important because of the increasing polarization in society. This happens especially on the subject of migration and the rise of both humanitarian support and anti-immigration sentiment in Europe.

The differences in treatment of refugee groups lead to critical questions about the consistency and legitimacy of policy making. If European societies claim that they support universal human rights and humanitarian principles, but yet deliberately apply these principles differently based on the origin of refugee groups, then that leads to questions about credibility that can weaken the public trust in institutions and democratic processes (Kienast, Feith Tan & Vedsted-Hansen, 2023). By understanding how students perceive and understand these contradictions this can lead to insights of the strengths and weaknesses of democratic values that are under pressure. Furthermore, the 'double standard' has implications for social cohesion within increasingly diverse societies within Europe. When refugee reception policies begin to give certain refugee groups preferential treatment over others based on cultural or racial characteristics, it can lead to social tensions and it can reinforce discriminatory attitudes. It can also overwhelm efforts to build inclusive and multicultural communities. On the other side, if students show an understanding of the difficulties involved and support more equal and fair approaches, this can lead to broader social consensus around fairness and humane refugee policies.

1.4 Scientific Relevance

The concept of a 'double standard' in refugee reception has been examined in academic literature, but most studies focus on institutional, legal or media-level analyses (Carlsen & Toubøl, 2023; McCloskey, 2022; Kienast, Feith Tan, & Vedsted-Hansen, 2023), which makes that there is limited empirical research that investigates how this 'double standard' is perceived and understood by the public and especially young adults in higher education. This research focuses on the question of how university students perceive the 'double standard' in refugee reception. It does so by examining their interpretations, reasoning and attitudes towards differential treatment of refugee groups. University students are exposed to both academic and social narratives and are therefore in a unique position to offer informed and reflective perspectives on challenging topics such as refugee justice. By focusing on students' perceptions of the 'double standard' this study contributes to the field of public opinion research as well as to the discussion on the topic of justice and values in shaping policy decisions. This will help to bridge the gap between institutional analyses and social viewpoints.

The scientific importance of this research lies in its multiple theoretical contributions to the existing academic literature. It explains the application of the Framing Theory to migration studies, by examining how university students process and understand different frames around the 'double standard' in refugee reception. While Dennison (2024) explored how migration narratives are constructed and their general effects on public attitudes, this research dives deeper into the process of how students understand and view contradictory frames of differential refugee treatment. By focusing on university students, who are exposed to diverse information sources and analytical frameworks, the study provides insights into how educated audiences process complex narratives that are often found around inequities in refugee policy.

The research contributes to the Social Identity Theory by examining how the sometimes multiple identities of students interact to shape their perceptions of the 'double standard' towards different refugee groups. University students often have multiple identities as Europeans, global citizens, members of specific ethnic groups or as advocates of certain political frameworks. This variety of identities gives an opportunity to investigate how different identities influence the interpretations of students on differential refugee treatment. It also creates an opportunity to see how students handle conflicts between competing group identities when evaluating the fairness of refugee policies. This will add a nuance to the existing Social Theory applications in migration research, as it often just assumes relative simple in-group/out-group distinctions.

The research also contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence about how university students perceive and justify differential refugee treatment. This research examines whether students have a distinct perspective on the subject of refugee reception.

This research provides information about an understudied demographic group's perspective on challenging policy issues, which contributes to public opinion research on migration while also adding to the broader discussions about refugee policy and societal responses. By

examining how future leaders and opinion makers perceive the differential treatment of refugees, this study offers insight into the sustainability of the policies and the influence of education in shaping attitudes towards global issues. The findings offer foundations for future comparative research and contribute to multiple disciplines such as political sciences, social psychology and higher education research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study uses two theories to examine how university students perceive and interpret the 'double standard' in refugee reception: Framing Theory and Social Identity Theory. These theories provide lenses which help understand both the cognitive processes through which students form their perceptions and the psychological processes that influence their attitudes towards different refugee groups.

In The Netherlands there are a number of people with refugee backgrounds. As of the end of 2023, there were approximately 237,000 individuals with refugee or temporary protection status, which is about 132,000 recognized refugees (mainly from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Turkey) and around 105,000 Ukrainians under temporary protection (IND, 2025).

2.1 Literature review

The activation of Temporary Protection Directive of the European Union on March 4, 2022, was an important moment in refugee policy that caused new academic interest in the different responses to refugee groups within Europe. This directive provided Ukrainian refugees with immediate access to residence permits, employment rights and social services (European Union, 2023). These benefits had been systematically denied to other refugee populations. Kienast, Feith Tan, and Vedsted-Hansen (2023) critically examine this development, raising fundamental questions about the legal consistency and principled application of asylum frameworks within Europe.

The difference between the immediate implementation of temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees and the restrictive border policies, long asylum procedures and limited rights given to refugees from the Global South has become a central point of focus for scholars that examine institutional discrimination in refugee governance.

Research that examined the local implementation of differential refugee policies has revealed the complex ways in which institutional hierarchies play out in practice. Bolzoni, Donatiello, and Giannetto (2023) provide valuable insights into how civil society organizations and municipal authorities deal with these policy hierarchies in their service provision. Their research shows that local actors often reproduce differential treatment while at the same time experiencing moral tensions about the differentiated treatment.

This research demonstrates the tension between institutional directives and ethical considerations among those who are directly involved in refugee assistance. This suggests that the 'double standard' operates not only at the policy level but also through the practical implementation of services and support systems.

The role of media information in constructing different perceptions of refugee groups has been broadly documented. Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2019) have done thorough analysis of media cartography, which demonstrates how migration from the Global South is typically portrayed in a militaristic way that frames refugee movements as perceived threats. Notably, these same visual strategies have not been employed in representations of Ukrainian refugee movements, which leads to the creation of fundamentally different visual narratives for different refugee populations.

Research on migration narratives gives insights into how different stories about migration influence both public attitudes and policy outcomes. Dennison (2021) comes up with a comprehensive framework for understanding migration narratives. It does so by defining them as depictions of reality across time that include causal claims and normative lessons. This work argues that narratives function as important cognitive tools that people use to make understand complex realities, which makes them influential in shaping perceptions of migration and refugee issues.

Dennison's analysis reveals that the popularity of a narrative is determined by three key factors: contextual factors, the nature of the narrative itself and individual alignment with personal interests, identity and values. This framework helps explain why certain narratives about Ukrainian refugees that emphasize cultural proximity and legitimate victimhood may gain more traction than narratives about refugees from other regions. The research highlights how narratives that focus on threatening aspects of migration have influenced policy outcomes, which have led to stricter border policies for instance.

On the subject of media analysis, scholars have identified broader cultural narratives that shape refugee reception. McCloskey (2022) introduces the concept of a "hierarchy of victims," which explains how proximity to European identity, whiteness and Christianity determines the levels of public empathy and political support. The identification of these hierarchical structures shows how cultural perceptions and institutional responses lead to reinforcing cycles, where differential media representation influences public opinion, which in turn shapes policy implementation and resource allocation.

Perhaps most surprisingly, research has revealed that the 'double standard' even operates within spaces that are committed to refugee advocacy. Carlsen and Toubøl (2023) have researched solidarity movements and discovered that there are internal tensions between universalist approaches that advocate for equal treatment of all refugees and particularist positions that prioritize support for specific groups, especially Ukrainians.

2.2 The 'Double Standard'

Media Representation and Framing

According to Carlsen & Toubøl (2023), the media has framed Ukrainian refugees as victims, civilized, and similar to us, by often using images of women and children fleeing war. In contrast, refugees from the Global South have been portrayed through frames of chaos, disturbance and economic threat. The Framing Theory (Dennison, 2021) helps to explain how these framings influence public perception and political discourse, which leads to a different sentiment towards different refugee groups.

Social and Psychological Biases

McCloskey (2022) introduces the concept of a "hierarchy of victims," in which refugees are perceived by society based on racial and cultural proximity. The refugee groups that are more similar to the host population, white, Christian, European, are seen as more "deserving" of protection, while others are more likely to be seen as suspicious or troublesome. The Social Identity Theory helps to explain this occurrence through in-group/out-group dynamics. This dynamics lead to preferential treatment of refugees who are seen as part of the in-group and leads to discrimination against refugees who are seen as part of the out-groups.

2.3 Framing Theory

The theoretical framework based on the Framing Theory, which is conceived by communication and media studies, suggests that the interpretation and reaction to information by audience members varies with the way information is framed and how context is given (Entman, 1993). Dennison (2021) applies this theoretical framework to migration narratives, by illustrating how the various framings of refugee experiences influence societal responses. According to Dennison, effective migration narratives include important elements such as emotional appeal, moral framing and a clear identification of the actors and the victims. This in turn determines whether audience's sympathize or respond with anxiety.

The Framing Theory expands the knowledge of how media representations and public discourse shape group images of reception for refugees. This is consistent with results from Dennison (2024) showing that stories of refugees as victims of violence or unfair treatment trigger empathy and support, while stories about refugees as an economic strain and cultural threats produce anxiety and resistance. This theoretical insight is particularly relevant for understanding the difference in reception of Ukrainian refugees versus the reception of other refugee groups, as media has consistently framed these groups differently.

Ukrainian refugees have mostly been framed through what Dennison calls 'victim narratives', which portrays refugees as innocent civilians fleeing aggression, with an emphasis on their similarity to European audiences in terms of culture, religion and lifestyle. In contrast, 'Threat narratives' have been particularly common in depictions of refugees from other

parts of the world than Europe, especially Africa or the Middle East, who have been represented as security threats, economic liabilities or culturally incompatible (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2019).

The Framing Theory suggests that such variation of representation is not passively received by audiences but actively interpreted in terms of people's pre-existing cognitive structures, attitudes and identities (Dennison, 2024). This is relevant for understanding how university students, who in academic discourse, media content and peer relations are frequently confronted with multiple, contradicting and overlapping frames, make sense of refugee reception policies.

This theory also highlights how crucial emotional identification and narrative coherence are to the development of frame effectiveness. Frames that support their preexisting worldviews or offer emotionally fulfilling explanations for certain occurrences may have a higher chance of being accepted by students. This implies that students' perceptions of the 'double standard' can be impacted by the framing of policy differences as well as factual information about them.

2.4 Social Identity Theory

The second theory for this research is the Social Identity Theory, which is created by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1986. It explains how intergroup attitudes and behaviors are influenced by group membership and identification processes. According to the theory, people's self-concept is partially obtained from their social group membership and they are encouraged to maintain a positive social identity by making positive comparisons between their in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The Social Identity Theory is based on three basic processes: Social comparison (comparing groups to preserve self-esteem through positive distinctiveness), social categorization (classifying individuals into groups) and social identity (adopting the identity of the groups to which individuals belong). These mechanisms contribute to the explanation of why, even in minimal group context where membership is random and temporary, people frequently display in-group favoring and out-group discrimination.

Strong explanatory frameworks for comprehending patterns of unequal treatment in the context of refugees are offered by the Social Identity Theory. McCloskey (2022) makes particular reference to social identification processes when talking about the 'hierarchy of victims' in humanitarian actions. He states that the perceived ethnic, religious, cultural and geographic similarities between Ukrainian refugees and Western European communities are the reason for the feelings of resemblance. While cultural and racial distinctions from refugees from the Global South may lead to categorization as out-group members, which could result in decreased empathy and support, this apparent resemblance makes identification and empathy easier.

Because it predicts that sentiments toward various refugee groups would be influenced by how students define themselves and others in terms of social identities. The theory is especially relevant to understand the viewpoints of university students. Because of perceived in-group similarities, students who firmly identify as European, Western or white

may be more empathic towards Ukrainian refugees. On the other hand, students who identify with marginalized groups or who have more cosmopolitan identities might be more supportive of universal humanitarian ideals and more skeptical of discrimination.

Additionally, Social Identity Theory assists in the explanation of possible individual variations in students' perceptions of the 'double standard.' Students may be more sensitive to perceived injustices in refugee treatment if they have stronger ethnic or religious ties to areas impacted by other conflicts. Similarly, when faced with evidence of discrimination, students who strongly identify with humanitarian principles or global citizenship may experience internal conflict, which could lead to more critical evaluations of existing policies.

According to the theory, individual views would be influenced by the social context and group norms in academic settings. Students who are part of social networks that promote multicultural ideals and international solidarity could form different viewpoints than those who are in settings that place more emphasis on cultural uniformity or national interests.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative methodology to explore how university students perceive 'double standards' in refugee reception. The goal of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perspectives, experiences and interpretations of differential treatment in refugee reception practices and policies (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). This interpretative approach is in line with the recommendations for exploring complex social situations where individual processes are central to understanding the research problem (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the first section the research design is discussed and it is explained why this design was chosen. The second part will elaborate on the participants of the study and the collection process of the data. The third part discusses the analysis and the findings of the analysis. The final section focusses on the considerations of the researcher, which are positionality, bias, validity and reliability.

3.1 Research Design

For this research a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews was selected in order to explore participants' perception while maintaining an adequate structure to address the research objectives (Kallio et al., 2016). This approach allowed for the collection of detailed data about students' understanding of refugee reception and their observations of potential double standards in treatment. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for explanatory research on sensitive topics, because they provide flexibility to dive deeper into responses of the participants while also ensuring comprehensive coverage of key themes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

3.2 Data Collection

For this research twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from Radboud University between the ages 19-25. To ensure diversity in academic backgrounds this study used a purposive sampling strategy by recruiting participants from multiple disciplines including Law, History, Medicine, Business, Economics and Geography, Spatial Planning and Environment (Patton, 2015). All the interviews were conducted in study rooms on the university campus. This interdisciplinary approach was chosen to represent a broad range of perspectives that might be influenced by different academic frameworks and knowledge bases. The sample size of twelve participants is in line with the recommendations for qualitative interview studies, where saturation typically occurs between 6-12 interviews for homogeneous populations (Guest et al., 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the table down below, there is an overview of the participants and the date the interview was conducted.

Name participant	Date of interview
Bas	06-05-2025
Floor	06-05-2025
Mirthe	08-05-2025
Daan	15-05-2025
Jan	15-05-2025
Mats	16-05-2025
Noa	16-05-2025
Tijn	20-05-2025
Joost	20-05-2025
Mathijs	21-05-2025

Guus	21-05-2025
Emma	23-05-2025

The interview guide was developed by operationalizing the main concepts of the study, especially the concepts of ‘double standards’ in refugee reception. This term was used to describe the observed differences in the treatment of refugee groups, especially between Ukrainian refugees (under Temporary Protection) and refugees from other regions. The interview guide was structured to gradually lead participants from general understandings to more reflective and evaluative insights. It was also designed with open-ended questions to follow up on relevant responses.

To operationalize ‘awareness and understanding of refugee reception,’ participants were asked:

“What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘refugee’?”

“How do you think refugees are received and welcomed in Europe?”

To explore ‘media and framing,’ questions included:

“Where do you usually get your information about refugees or migration?”

“How are refugees talked about in the media?”

‘Social identity and cultural proximity’ were operationalized through questions such as:

“Do you have more in common with some groups of refugees than others?”

“Do you think that a certain group of refugees are better able to participate in society?”

To explore the concept of ‘double standards,’ questions included:

“Do you think there is a difference in the way Ukrainian refugees are treated compared to other refugee groups?”

“Do you think there are reasons why Ukrainian refugees are treated differently than refugees from Syria or Eritrea for example?”

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Dutch to make sure that participants could express themselves naturally and comprehensively in their native language. The language

choice is important in qualitative research because it affects ability of the participant to articulate complex thoughts and emotions (Squires, 2009). Each interview lasted between 20-35 minutes, which provided sufficient time for an in-depth exploration of the topics. The duration of the interviews aligns with recommendations for semi-structured interviews which explore complex social phenomena (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected interview data went through a thematic analysis by following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This systematic analysis for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within the data was selected because of its flexibility and suitability for exploring complex social phenomena such as perceptions of double standards. Thematic analysis is very fitting for research which seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and the meanings they assign to social phenomena (Nowell et al., 2017).

To interpret the collected data, the interviews were transcribed and read. During this first read, the researcher familiarized itself with the data and formed the first ideas about the data and the direction of the results. Through the use of codes the data was analyzed, organized and identified. 62 different codes were found. A thematic analysis was conducted to examine and identify themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The themes that were found are: Student Perspectives on Refugee Reception, Perceived Public Opinion and Media as a Framing Force. After this, quotes were chosen to enhance the data and support the results. In this context, it is important to consider that researchers build descriptions, apply codes, develop themes and come up with interpretations out of their own perspective of the literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This means that the results can differ when another researcher conducts the analysis. The Atlas.ti software was used to enable the coding process and to enhance the systematic organization of data.

3.4 Considerations

3.4.1 Positionality

The researcher understands that his/her position inevitably influences the research process as well as its interpretation. Just like the participants, he/she is a student at Radboud University. This helped with trust and also made it easier for participants to open up during interviews, especially when discussing sensitive or political topics. However, the researcher admits that his/her personal background, which includes its own national, cultural and political perspectives, may have influenced how he/she viewed the topic of refugee reception and interpreted the data. For instance, their prior academic exposure to different migration perspectives may have made them aware of issues of inequality and bias, which potentially influenced the focus they placed on particular responses or themes. The researcher tried to maintain a neutral stance during interviews and to avoid leading questions or reactions that might steer participant responses in a particular direction.

3.4.2 Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process by following fixed guidelines for qualitative research (Christians, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants by handing them a detailed information letter which explained the study's purpose, procedures and the participants' rights. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms for all participants and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and analysis materials, according to the principles of anonymity and data protection (Saunders et al., 2015).

3.4.3 Bias

Some potential sources of bias were admitted and addressed in this study by following fixed qualitative research practices (Maxwell, 2013). Researcher bias was reduced through using reflective practices, which include regular reflection on personal assumptions and perceptions that might influence data interpretation (Berger, 2015). The use of a structured interview guide helped to guarantee consistency across interviews, while the flexibility made it possible that the semi-structured interviews could go with the natural conversation flow.

The selection bias was limited by recruiting participants from diverse academic backgrounds, although the limitation to Radboud University students represents a specific demographic focus. The confirmation bias was limited by following systematic thematic analysis procedures and the use of Atlas.ti software to ensure thorough consideration of all data rather than selective attention to confirming evidence (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

3.4.4 Internal Validity

Internal validity is assured through following several measures of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for creating trustworthiness in qualitative research. Credibility was earned by conducting the interviews in the native language of the participants (Dutch) and by allowing enough time for extensive responses. The semi-structured format allowed for clarification of responses and deeper exploration of complex topics. By using fixed analytical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2021) the dependability was ensured.

Confirmability was ensured by using systematic coding procedures and by using of qualitative analysis software (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The theoretical basis in framing theory and social identity theory provided established frameworks for understanding and interpreting the findings.

3.4.5 External Validity

The external validity is enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, characteristics of the participants and analytical processes (Shenton, 2004). While the findings are specific to Radboud University students, the diversity of academic backgrounds and the detailed methodological documentation enables readers to judge the relevance of

the findings to other university contexts. The detailed description enables analytical generalization, where findings can be used in similar contexts with comparable populations and conditions (Yin, 2018).

3.4.6 Reliability

Throughout the research consistency was maintained through the use of a structured interview guide and systematic analytical procedures (Miles et al., 2020). The use of fixed theoretical frameworks and analytical methods (Braun & Clarke, 2021) contributes to the study's methodological thoroughness.

Reproducibility is enabled by keeping a detailed documentation of all methodological procedures, from participant recruitment through data analysis. The use of Atlas.ti software adds additional transparency in the coding and analysis process, by enabling verification of analytical decisions and procedures (Carcary, 2020).

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings from twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with university students from Radboud University. The goal of the study was to explore how students perceive the 'double standard' in refugee reception. It focuses especially on the differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to those from regions such as the Middle East and Africa. The data was thematically analyzed by using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This allowed for the identification of recurring patterns in how participants make sense of refugee treatment, public discourse and their own values.

Three main themes emerged from the analysis: **Student Perspectives on Refugee Reception**, **Perceived Public Opinion** and **Media as a Framing Force**. Together, these themes reflect the complex interconnection between personal belief systems, societal narratives and media influence.

The first theme, *Student Perspectives on Refugee Reception*, examines how students evaluate their own attitudes and emotional responses. This includes the internal tensions that occurred when discussing ideals of fairness and practical concerns about cultural integration. Subthemes within this category include cultural considerations, fairness and critical thinking.

The second theme, *Perceived Public Opinion*, explores how students interpret broader societal attitudes towards refugee groups, which includes negative stereotypes, fear of the unknown and the role of education in shaping opinions. It shows how participants position themselves in relation to these public attitudes and how they understand the societal attitudes that support differential treatment.

The third theme, *Media as a Framing Force*, investigates how students perceive the media's role in shaping both public sentiment and their own views. Participants reflected on their

use of various media sources, critiqued framing techniques and identified a pattern of preferential treatment in media coverage. They referred to this preferential treatment as the “Ukrainian advantage.”

The following sections explain each theme in detail and is supported by direct quotes from participants that explain the nuances in their perspectives on refugee reception.

4.1 Student Perspectives on Refugee Reception

This theme explores how university students form their personal opinions about refugee reception and the perceived double standard between different refugee groups. Student attitudes came out to be reflective, emotionally loaded and shaped by ongoing tensions between values like fairness and social cohesion. The participants struggled with cultural differences, moral judgments and different levels of critical reflection. Their perspectives were constructed through lived experiences, education and broader social influences.

4.1.1 Cultural Considerations and Internal Conflict

Cultural familiarity was an important dimension of student attitudes and it influenced their perceptions of fairness and integration. Students expressed a strong wish that treatment was equal for all refugee groups, but many admitted that they felt more comfortable with refugees who share similar cultural traits. This was particularly noticeable in how they discussed the reception of Ukrainian refugees. Ukrainians were often perceived as culturally proximate and therefore were easier to accept.

Joost, for example, acknowledged the contradiction between his values and feelings: *“Yes, sure it's not really fair, but yes, under the motto of Europe I understand it somewhere.”* This reflects a broader internal tension. Although most students were opposed to discrimination, many felt that cultural similarity made it easier to explain, sometimes even justify, the unequal treatment that different refugee groups received.

Students frequently argued that cultural proximity made it easier for refugee groups to integrate. Some argued that shared religion, customs or appearance made Ukrainian refugees appear less threatening and more manageable. As Emma stated, *“I don't necessarily know if Ukrainians get preferential treatment, but people who just look different, I think they get the opposite of a preferential treatment.”* Her observation shows a perception that visible difference still continuously influence public and personal attitudes, even if it is subconsciously.

Participants often reflected in a critical way on these feelings. Guus, for instance, argues that personal experience plays a role in shaping perceptions: *“It maybe comes a little bit through experience or something, that from experience you have had a few times a bad situation, or a less pleasant situation with someone who then happened to be tinted.”* His comment reveals that even small interactions can unconsciously influence views on cultural groups. This even happens among students who generally advocate for equality.

These insights can be seen through the lens of Social Identity Theory: students were actively negotiating the boundaries of the “in-group.” While most students recognized that cultural preference can lead to a biased treatment, they also showed how hard it is to fully remove fairness from familiarity, even for educated and reflective individuals.

4.1.2 Fairness, Morality, and Emotional Discomfort

Discussions about fairness were often accompanied with emotion. The difference in treatment between Ukrainian refugees and those from other parts of the world created feelings of frustration, moral disapproval and discomfort among most participants. This emotional response was the ethical core of many of the students’ attitudes.

Noa, for instance, pointed out the uneven bureaucratic procedures between groups: *“But refugees really get screened from here to Tokyo. It seems like it's already assumed that they're holding something back. And Ukrainians just have no process at all. Then I'm like, why do you trust the one group?”* Her comment goes further than just a factual observation, it shows the moral discomfort students experience when they witness unequal treatment that seems to be institutionally endorsed.

Other students also showed concerns about how public support and empathy. Floor connected this disparity to structural racism, by stating: *“And there's just a lot of racism. We're still dealing with that. And I think that also manifests itself in how people take in refugees from different cultural groups.”* This awareness shows that participants were not only identifying the double standard but also that they were linking it to broader societal issues and not only to isolated policy decisions.

Students like Joost made connections between public attitudes and political outcomes, by saying: *“Yes, I think the Netherlands did make some kind of clear statement with the PVV vote.”* This statement suggests that students view refugee treatment as a reflection of societal values. They do so by arguing that unfairness is not an incidental occurrence but that it is embedded within political and public structures.

These reactions align with McCloskey’s (2022) concept of the “Hierarchy of Victims.” Students recognized that refugees from culturally and geographically distant regions were placed lower in the imagined hierarchy and because of that they received less empathy and support. What stands out is that university students not only recognize this hierarchy but also feel a strong sense of discomfort and moral urgency about it. This suggests that students will potentially participate in critical engagement and resistance.

4.1.3 Critical Thinking and Reflexivity

All participants shared their thoughts on culture and fairness, but they varied a lot in the depth of their reasoning. Critical thinking, which is the ability to question assumptions, evaluate sources and reflect on one’s own biases, came up as an important factor to differentiate student attitudes.

Several students questioned the reliability of media sources and they noticed that differences in information can shape attitudes. Guus commented, *“Look, the Telegraph, I don't have a high opinion of that. It's a bit of crap, in my opinion. I do believe that the Telegraph talks about the refugee situation in a different way than NOS.”* His comment demonstrates not only his media literacy but also his awareness of framing. This aligns with Dennison's (2021) Framing Theory, which explains the idea that how information is presented affects interpretation and public sentiment.

Some students showed that they were aware of their own potential biases and they tried to be more reflective. Tijn gave an example of how practices he found weird or was unfamiliar with, such as praying in public, can create feelings of discomfort: *“Yes, suppose for you it's quite normal to suddenly start praying at 11 o'clock. And you just do that somewhere around the ground here. Then I would also find that a little strange and I would start to have an opinion about that.”* His honest reflection shows how cultural unfamiliarity can lead to more negative judgments, even when students are aware that such judgments may be unfair.

Noa gave an example of how personal experience leads to more and better critical thinking. She regularly speaks with a refugee from Yemen because she participates in a buddy program. This has shaped her perspective on the reception process: *“Yes, it's really very nice, but that's also where I often talk to him about this kind of process and also how he is treated, so to speak.”* This kind of direct contact with refugees encourages students to look at asylum procedures and integration processes from the point of view of the refugees.

However, not all students actively engaged in such reflection. Bas admitted honestly that he has a more passive approach: *“I don't really keep up with the news myself, but you hear about it sometimes. So I think I get the most actually from friends of mine who might have something to do with it then.”* Even though he is less critically engaged, Bas still showed awareness of his own limitations. This suggests that even students that are not actively involved in the critical thinking process are not entirely unaware of the situation.

Critical thinking functions as a filter through which students interpreted fairness, cultural difference and media coverage. Students that were more exposed to diverse viewpoints or direct experience showed to have more layered, empathetic and analytically grounded perspectives on the double standard in refugee reception.

4.2 Perceived Public Opinion

This theme explores how university students perceive broader societal attitudes towards refugees and how they position themselves in relation to these perceived norms. The personal views of students often contrasted with what they believed to be the dominant public opinion. These contrasts were formed by assumptions about cultural proximity, media narratives and differences in education level. Sometimes students showed empathy and concern for the public's limited access to information, but sometimes they came showed disappointment or frustration with public attitudes that came across as uninformed or discriminatory. This theme highlights how students interpret the public opinion around

refugee reception and how that societal views contribute to the persistence of 'double standards.'

4.2.1 Negative Associations and Stereotypes

Students described that public attitudes towards refugees were strongly influenced by negative associations and stereotypes, especially towards non-European groups. They noticed that the public discourse tends to focus on the risks, problems and disruptions that are associated with refugees. These associations are often based on isolated incidents or sensational media reports. Mirthe explained this pattern by referencing to the coverage of the Dutch refugee center in Ter Apel: *"A lot of people do use that as their benchmark and use it as the way they see the refugees. So when all that bad news then about Ter Apel was in the news, it was much more about showing what all is broken or what is going wrong."*

This perception shows a broader public tendency to focus on fear and disruption rather than humanitarian needs or integration successes. Students also observed that these negative narratives are barely being balanced by positive stories about refugees that are contributing to society. The lack of such coverage leads to many to many people generalizing refugees as threats, according to Mirthe: *"I think there are a lot of people who don't read up beyond just watching the news and then they think, oh, I don't want a refugee center near me... because then I too will have, I don't know, a window smashed or fights in the neighborhood."*

These views suggest that students see the public opinion as shaped more by fear and generalization than by direct contact or comprehensive understanding. They pointed out that Ukrainian refugees are largely spared these from these negative associations. This also leads to a differentiated reception procedure, as Noa explained, *"I think Ukrainians are being taken care of pretty okay in Europe... but I think for other refugees that's a lot harder, because... there are really mega-long processes that precede before somebody gets a residence permit at all."*

Students interpreted these differences as part of a 'double standard,' which reinforces the idea that deep-rooted stereotypes view certain groups as more deserving than others.

4.2.2 Limited Information and Misinformation

Many students connect the negative public attitudes to a lack of information, or even worse the spread of misinformation. They described public knowledge as fragmented and superficial and they argued that it is often shaped by headlines rather than deeper understanding. Joost, for instance, gave an example of a conversation at work where he felt others were simply misinformed: *"When I'm having my break at work, and I hear people talk about it, then I think you guys are just making this up. Because it's impossible that you guys found this on the news."*

Students argued that many people formed their opinions about refugees based on assumptions or incomplete media narratives. Daan commented on the lack of awareness

about ongoing crises outside Europe: *"Meanwhile there are heavy civil wars in African countries and there are almost no talks about it."* This limited vision contributes to a hierarchy in compassion, according to students. When the public doesn't have a lot of knowledge about the difficulties of certain refugee groups, it becomes easier to forget about their needs and urgencies.

Joost also described how fake news and misinformation have an influence in shaping public attitudes, especially when this is shared through mass media: *"Yes, there is a lot of fake news there. Also a lot by big media channels who are seen as a good news source."*

Students ordered this into two categories: Willful ignorance and lack of access to reliable information. While some people choose not to educate themselves, others simply lack the tools or media literacy to access nuanced perspectives in the view of students.

4.2.3 Cultural Proximity and Group Identity

An important factor for explaining differences in public opinion was cultural proximity, according to students. Participants believed that the Dutch public is more likely to support refugees who appear culturally similar. This can be in religion, language, values or appearance. Jan put it simply: *"I think that cultural similarities really have a tremendously positive influence on public opinion... if you have the same identity, you're more likely to be more tolerant of a person anyway."*

This perception was often explained by feelings of emotional recognition and relatability. Mats explained, *"People from Ukraine, their culture is of course much closer to my culture... their norms and values are also much closer to my norms and values."* Because of these similarities it made it easier to identify with Ukrainian refugees, and as a result, it made it easier to welcome them. Students noted that cultural proximity made it easier for people to project themselves or their families onto Ukrainian refugees, which caused stronger feelings of empathy and urgency. Guus added, *"Because they are European, their culture is closer to us... They are more like us."*

On other side, students noticed that cultural differences, especially when it involves religion, language or visible markers such as clothing, led to greater resistance. Mats argued that the Islam in particular seems cause a feeling of discomfort in the Dutch society: *"I think a very large part of the Netherlands has something against Islamic people anyway... I think that certainly helps in public opinion towards refugees."* Students believed that for many Dutch people the cultural unfamiliarity with Muslim-majority refugees led to worries about social fragmentation or perceived threats to the national identity.

Several participants suggested that cultural proximity does not only function on a rational level but also on an emotional and even an subconscious level. People might not be able to explain why they prefer one group over another, but they could still feel more comfortable with those who appear to "fit in." This psychological comfort, although it was understood by participants, was often criticized as insufficient justification for differential treatment.

This analysis aligns with Social Identity Theory, as students observed that public attitudes are influenced by in-group/out-group dynamics. Cultural similarity leads to empathy and cultural differences creates attitudes of caution or even hostility. While many students understood this reaction as psychologically normal, at the same time they questioned its fairness, especially when it influences policy.

4.2.4 Education and Openness

Another explanation for differences in public attitudes that students mentioned was the education level. Students believed that more highly educated people tend to have a more positive and nuanced view on refugee reception. Joost mentioned this in a somewhat direct way: *"I associate such things with less intelligent people."*

Education was seen as the instrument that provided both the skills and the exposure that was necessary to form more informed opinions. Tijn observed, *"A dumb Dutchman might be quicker to go look on Facebook and read there that Mohamed stole a bag from Syria... and they're going to get public opinion about that right away."* Here, he connects the prejudice to education levels and the way how they interpret and understand the media.

Emma made a similar argument: *"At the university you just learn to highlight as many sides of a story as possible and then engage in truth-finding."* In her view education helps you to evolve habits of critical thinking that can help you analyze and look beyond one-sided narratives.

Many students also argued that university environments expose people to international and multicultural experiences, which further reduces prejudice. Joost reflected, *"I think our studies did teach me a lot which is why I have more empathy/compassion."*

These views suggest that students not only see themselves as more informed but that they also recognize and understand their educational privilege. This awareness gives an understanding as to why students often oppose the societal attitudes.

4.2.5 Fear of the Unknown

Students also named the fear of the unknown as an important influence of public resistance to refugee reception. They noticed that many people, especially those in rural areas, feel uncomfortable about the arrival of refugees due to the uncertainty about what changes they might bring. Joost reflected, *"I have the feeling that most of these protests are in the villages... where people are less used to accommodating or having other kinds of people than themselves."*

This fear does often not come from direct negative experiences, but from a lack of familiarity. Guus explained, *"If you are a Dutch farmer, you have a Dutch culture, you want to preserve it. And then suddenly an AZC comes to your village, that you're not so happy about"*

that." Refugees are in this context seen as the reason of cultural disruption and not as individuals in need.

Students also noted that this fear is not the same for every refugee group. Daan explained that Ukrainians appear less threatening because they are easier to understand and relate to: *"They sound a lot less distant from us. And so for some people, to put it bluntly, it's more manageable to help those people here."*

Despite admitting that these feelings are hard to get rid of, students were optimistic that it could be overcome. Participants suggested that increased information, contact or education could reduce the feelings of anxiety that are associated with unfamiliar refugee groups. In this way, they saw public opinion not as fixed, but as something that could evolve with greater exposure and understanding.

4.3 Media as a Framing Force

This final theme explores how students perceive media as an influential actor in shaping public attitudes and how it reinforces the 'double standards' in refugee reception. Media was not described as a passive source of information but as an active force that frames certain refugee groups more preferential than others. Students showed varying degrees of trust in media sources, which reflected on the selective nature of coverage. This drew connections between media narratives and public empathy. This theme investigates the relationship between media framing, social identity and cultural proximity and how these factors contribute to the construction of a "hierarchy of victims."

4.3.1 Media Sources and Trust

Students noticed that media sources differ a lot in reliability, focus and quality. They differentiated between traditional and social media, as well as between mainstream and alternative platforms. Despite the variety of platforms, participants often showed frustration at how refugee stories were presented. They argued that much of the coverage was either superficial, problem-oriented or one-sided, as Noa commented: *"The war in Ukraine is much more in the news."* This subtheme reveals how students evaluate media narratives and the extent to which they either critically engage or passively consume the information.

Joost commented, *"You so often assume that what you read is correct... I definitely believe that people get influenced by whichever source they use."* This comment reflects a general awareness of the influence that media outlets have, both on themselves and on society. Students understood that people who are more into sensationalist or politically charged outlets may develop biased or incomplete views on refugees.

Emma highlighted how political discourse slips into media narratives: *"I also think that, for example, the minister of asylum that we have now says unfoundedly that there would be a migration crisis... that is very much picked up by the media and that in turn makes the*

polarization worse." Her comment shows how media and politics are interconnected in shaping dominant narratives. They often lead to fear-based or exclusionary attitudes.

The analysis also showed variation in how students responded to the perceived shortcomings of media coverage. Some students went to actively look for alternative viewpoints or stories with a different viewpoint to develop a more balanced understanding. These students said that they used podcasts or social media accounts that highlight refugee perspectives for this. Others admitted to being less proactive. For example, some participants stated they continued to use mainstream platforms despite knowing its limitation. This did so out of convenience or a lack of time.

This division suggests that there are different levels of media literacy and critical engagement among students. Participants did not just critique media institutions, they reflected on their own behaviors and the effort or lack of it which they invested in finding the truth. For instance, students who did not search for alternative viewpoints often acknowledged the limitations of their perspectives.

For some, social media also had an influence. While some viewed platforms like Instagram or TikTok as spaces for alternative narratives, others criticized them for spreading misinformation.

Ultimately, students shared a common belief: media plays an important role not only in informing the public but also in shaping refugee narratives.

4.3.2 Cultural Framing in Coverage

An important factor observed by students was how refugees from different regions are framed in culturally distinct ways. Participants noticed that Ukrainian refugees are portrayed as familiar, Christian, European and therefore deserving of empathy. In contrast, refugees from the Middle East or Africa are more likely to be portrayed in contexts of danger, disruption or problems.

Tijn commented, *"People are less likely to have some kind of recognition with that than in Ukraine. Because Ukraine is a lot closer, it's Europe."* Guus stated a something similar: *"But the culture is more like us. They are more like us."*

These statements show how cultural framing influences emotional reactions. Students understood that media coverage doesn't just report events, it also subtly emphasizes which lives are more relatable or worthy of care. This distinction is a key factor in the reproduction of 'double standards.' Multiple participants noticed that when non-European refugees are mentioned, the framing tends to focus on challenges, such as security risks or integration problems, rather than shared suffering or need for humanitarian help.

This pattern is completely in line with Dennison's Framing Theory and it also reflects the workings of McCloskey's Hierarchy of Victims, where media selectively highlights characteristics that have more in common with the in-group which leads to the distancing of out-groups.

4.3.3 Ukrainian Advantage

The notion of a "Ukrainian advantage" came up in nearly every interview. Students noticed that the war in Ukraine received more sustained and sympathetic coverage than conflicts in countries like Syria or Afghanistan. This was explained through both geographic and cultural proximity.

Jan explained, *"Just putting the war in Ukraine more in the news, making people see that as more topical and as more urgent."* Mats added, *"Such a war in Syria has been going on for ten years or so... you don't hear much about that at some point."*

Students felt that this difference in attention led to more public empathy for Ukrainians, while others conflicts and refugee groups were completely ignored. Daan noted, *"Well, I think in that sense the Ukrainian refugees do have a slight advantage, because they are from Europe after all."*

Participants also noticed that the negative media portrayals of non-European refugees often focus criminal or disruptive behavior, as Tijn commented: *"And I think previously you also hear some more negative things about refugees. For example in the Apel that things are getting completely out of hand there. Or that there have been fights with refugees again."*

In summary, students perceived the media as a reinforcing factor for cultural hierarchies through selective visibility and framing. Ukrainian refugees were framed as familiar victims, while others were ignored. This perceived media bias has played an important role in the understanding of students of how public opinion comes to be and why 'double standards' persist in refugee reception.

Together, these three themes show how university students understand and evaluate the combination of personal belief, societal discourse and media influence when interpreting refugee reception. Their insights reflect both critical awareness and emotional struggles when analyzing the 'double standard' that decides who is seen as a legitimate victim and who is not.

5. Conclusion

This research explored how university students perceive the 'double standard' in refugee reception through a qualitative study which involved twelve semi-structured interviews with Radboud University students. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, three interconnected themes were found: *Student Perspectives on Refugee Reception*, *Perceived Public Opinion* and *Media as a Framing Force*. These theme together explain the ways in which students interpret the unequal treatment of different refugee groups and especially the preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees.

The analysis revealed that students are aware of the differential treatment that refugee groups receive and that they perceive this 'double standard' as a phenomenon that is shaped by factors such as media framing, cultural proximity and public sentiment. They specifically pointed out what they described as the "Ukrainian advantage," which refers to the more empathetic and supportive reception that Ukrainian refugees receive compared to those from countries such as Syria, Libya or Afghanistan. Students saw this as a clear demonstration of how cultural and geographic proximity contribute to a selective empathy towards refugee groups in both media and public narratives.

Students did not only describe these differences, but they also critically engaged with them. Many admitted that they had internal tensions between their ideals of fairness and the more instinctive preference for culturally similar refugee groups. This tension aligns with the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), where in-group preference and out-group distancing influence attitudes. Several students critically examined their own comfort levels and asked themselves how their preferences might reflect broader discriminatory prejudices. This is in line with McCloskey's (2022) "Hierarchy of Victims."

Media stood out as a key factor that shapes both public and personal opinions. Students saw media as both an information source and an influential factor in framing narratives, which is in line with Dennison's (2021) Framing Theory. They noticed that Ukrainians are framed through humanitarian lenses, while other groups are framed through lenses of security, threat or disorder. This reinforces the empathy towards some refugee groups while creating negative attitudes towards other refugee groups. Students were aware of these patterns and they often questioned the neutrality of the information they consumed.

What makes the student perspective unique is that they possess a combination of critical self-awareness and moral discomfort. Most participants were able to recognize systemic inequalities, identify the role of the media in reinforcing cultural hierarchies and to critically examine public opinion, while also acknowledging their own participation in these systems. Their views reflect an internal battle between empathy, cultural bias and moral responsibility.

This research shows that university students are critically engaged, but that they are not immune to the factors they criticize. Their perceptions are formed through a combination of personal values, public discourse and institutional narratives and this combination sustains

the 'double standard' in refugee reception, even among high educated, socially conscious individuals.

5.1 Discussion

The way students understand media influence strongly aligns with Dennison's (2024) framing theory in migration research. They show a critical attitude towards media outlets and content by admitting that the media purposely creates different narratives of treatment for different refugee groups. The way that Ukrainian refugees are consistently framed through humanitarian lenses while other refugee groups are framed through security-focused lenses is an example of how narrative creation influences public opinion towards different refugee groups. The ability of the participants to recognize these framing patterns while also acknowledging the influence it has on their own perspectives indicates that critical education helps to develop analytical tools, but it can't completely neutralize emotional responses to refugee groups.

The "Ukrainian advantage", as identified by participants shows how perceived cultural similarity creates preferential differences. This supports the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and De Coninck's (2019) framework on migrant categorizations. The differences between temporary protection for Ukrainians and documented violence against other refugees at European borders leads to a "hierarchy of victims" (McCloskey, 2022). Participants were frustrated with these inequalities, but they acknowledged that practical considerations show the difficult moral decisions which policymakers have to face when they implement refugee reception policies.

5.2 Limitations

The biggest limitation of the study lies in its restricted sample of highly educated Radboud University students, which causes demographic homogeneity that limits generalizability. Research tells us that the education level influences refugee attitudes (Mancini et al., 2018), which suggests that the findings may not reflect broader population perspectives. The semi-structured interview approach, which is effective for capturing nuanced perspectives, may include a social desirability bias because of the sensitive nature of the topic of refugee reception and potential prejudices.

This research adds to the understanding of how educated young adults perceive complex social justice issues. The findings suggest that university students have good analytical capacity for recognizing systematic inequalities, but at the same time they are dealing with internal struggles regarding cultural preferences and ideas of fairness. The qualitative approach of using semi-structured interviews helped to effectively capture nuanced perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but the limitation of the study to highly educated and predominantly Dutch students should be taken in to consideration when interpreting findings.

The participants showed sophistication in analyzing double standards in refugee reception while also admitting their participation in discriminatory systems. Their perspectives revealed a complex connection between media influence, personal attitude and public opinion dynamics. This suggests that while education increases critical thinking abilities about social justice issues, it does not remove difficulties in balancing between ideal values and practical considerations in diverse societies.

5.3 Recommendations

Universities could develop courses that focus on migration and social justice. In these courses they could incorporate engagement with refugee communities and develop analytical tools that help students to examine cultural biases and help them understand systematic inequalities.

Media organizations could develop editorial guidelines that address the differential framing of refugee stories, by explaining how humanitarian perspectives are applied to Ukrainian refugees and security-focused perspectives are applied to other refugee groups.

Policymakers could conduct systematic reviews of refugee reception policies to identify sources of differential treatment. This will lead to the development of consistent protection standards for all refugee groups.

Research should expand beyond university students to examine perceptions across diverse demographic groups. It should conduct studies that track refugee attitude evolution over time and it should implement a comparative research across European countries and educational institutions to further develop the understanding of how different contexts shape student perspectives on refugee reception.

5.4 Reflection

Working on this thesis has been the most educational part of my academic career so far. The research topic, how university students perceive the 'double standard' in refugee reception, was not something I randomly chose. It was something that I had an interest in because of experiences that had a significant impact on me. During my gap year, I spent several months in Cape Town and last semester I studied and traveled through South America. Both experiences exposed me to forms of inequality, poverty and discrimination that changed the way that I look at the world. I saw and met people that live in extremely challenging circumstances. These experiences sparked an interest in social justice and it strengthened my belief that everyone deserves equal support and rights.

When the war in Ukraine began, I started to notice that in the media and public discourse the reception of Ukrainian refugees was overwhelmingly welcoming, people were even offering them a place to stay in their own house. All this happened while refugees from other regions still continued to face skepticism, bureaucratic barriers and even hostility. This

contrast led me to this topic. I wanted to find out if others, especially fellow students, noticed the same difference and how they made sense of it.

I began the research with motivation and a strong personal interest, but I quickly found out that conducting a thesis is far from easy. One of the biggest challenges for me was trying to remain neutral. I have a strong opinion about this issue and it was difficult not to let my own opinions influence the interviews or the analysis. I had to constantly remind myself that my role as a researcher was to listen and interpret and not to convince or influence. This was especially difficult when participants said things that I strongly agree or disagree with. However, it also taught me how important the value of academic distance and critical thinking is in conducting research.

Conducting the interviews was the part of the research that I enjoyed most. I found it very interesting to hear how other students viewed the topic, what influenced their thinking and how they viewed the media, public opinion and cultural factors. These kinds of conversations I normally don't really have. I've learned that even among students, opinions and reasoning can differ a lot. I have learned that even high educated people can still struggle with bias, discomfort or a lack of information, including myself.

If I were to conduct this research again I would try to have a better time management. If I took more time for the interviews then that would have allowed me to reflect more deeply between interviews and perhaps change some of my questions based on earlier insights.

I think that because of this research I have grown a lot, both academically and personally. This was the first time I did every stage of a research project myself, from coming up with the research question to analyzing qualitative data and writing the final report. It made me more independent and more confident in my abilities as a researcher. On a personal level, I've also learned that my feelings for fairness and refugee rights are even stronger than I had realized.

Writing this thesis has also helped me develop skills that I will continue to use in the future. I now feel more prepared for the kinds of research that I might encounter in a master's program or a professional role. I believe that the issues that I researched in this thesis will continue to play a role in my academic and professional life and I hope to contribute something meaningful to discussions around how we treat people in need, without caring about where they come from.

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Appendix

Interviewgide

Onderzoeksvraag: Hoe kijken universiteitsstudenten aan tegen de “dubbele standaard” in de opvang van vluchtelingen?

Bewustzijn en begrip van de opvang van vluchtelingen

Subthema's: Definities, algemene kennis, begrip van beleid

- Waar denk je aan als je de term “vluchteling” hoort?
- Denk je bij Oekraïners aan dezelfde dingen?
- Hoe worden vluchtelingen volgens jou opgevangen en verwelkomd in Europa?
- Hoe zou je zeggen dat vluchtelingen over het algemeen in Nederland worden opgevangen?

Mediaberichten en informatiebronnen (framingtheorie)

Subthema's: Media-invloed, framing, informatiebronnen

- Waar haal je meestal je informatie over vluchtelingen of migratie vandaan?
- Hoe wordt er over vluchtelingen in de media gesproken? (Wat voor woorden denk je aan?)
- Denk je dat verschillende bronnen op verschillende manieren over vluchtelingen praten?
- Wordt er op dezelfde manier over Oekraïners als over andere vluchtelingen gesproken?
- Komen vrienden/familie/collega's/bekenden op dezelfde manier aan informatie over vluchtelingen en migratie als jij?
- Denk je dat hun bron van informatie hun mening over vluchtelingen kan beïnvloeden?
- Denk je dat de berichtgeving in de media een invloed heeft op de publieke opinie tegenover vluchtelingen?

Sociale identiteit en culturele nabijheid (sociale identiteitstheorie)

Subthema's: In-groep/uit-groep dynamiek, culturele nabijheid, empathie

- Vind je dat je overeenkomsten hebt met vluchtelingen?
- Heb je met de ene groep vluchtelingen meer overeenkomsten dan met de ander?
- Waar liggen deze verschillen/overeenkomsten?
- Vind je dat vluchtelingen evenveel deelnemer zijn van de maatschappij als jij?
- Vind je dat een bepaalde groep vluchtelingen beter mee kan in de maatschappij? (Waar liggen deze verschillen aan?)
- Denken vrienden/collega's/bekenden hetzelfde over vluchtelingen als jij? (Zijn ze het eens met de overeenkomsten, vinden ze vluchtelingen evenwaardige deelnemers aan de maatschappij?)
- Denk je dat sommige vrienden/familie/bekenden dichterbij vluchtelingen staan dan jij?
- Denk je dat sommige vrienden/familie/bekenden verder van vluchtelingen af staan dan jij?
- Hoe denk je dat culturele overeenkomsten of een gedeelde identiteit van een vluchtelingengroep de publieke opinie ten opzichte van vluchtelingen beïnvloedt?

Reflectie en bredere perspectieven

Subthema's: Veranderingen in meningen, bredere discoursen

- Denk je dat andere studenten jouw opvattingen over de opvang van vluchtelingen delen? Waarom wel of waarom niet?
- Zijn je gedachten over de opvang van vluchtelingen in de loop der tijd veranderd? Zo ja, wat heeft dat beïnvloed?
- Is er nog iets dat volgens jou belangrijk is bij het denken over de opvang van vluchtelingen en eerlijkheid?

Percepties van verschil / De "dubbele standaard"

Subthema's: Verdienste, erkenning van ongelijke behandeling, interpretatie van “dubbele standaard”

- Denk je dat er een verschil is in de manier waarop Oekraïense vluchtelingen worden behandeld in vergelijking met andere vluchtelingengroepen?
- Wist je dat vluchtelingen uit Oekraïne een andere legale status hebben dan andere vluchtelingengroepen?
- Vind je het eerlijk dat er een verschil in zit?
- Wat vind je ervan dat Oekraïense vluchtelingen sneller toegang krijgen tot werk, huisvesting en onderwijs dan andere vluchtelingengroepen?
- Denk je dat er redenen zijn waarom Oekraïense vluchtelingen anders worden behandeld dan bijvoorbeeld vluchtelingen uit Syrië of Eritrea?
- Hoe denk je dat deze ongelijke behandeling wordt gerechtvaardigd door de overheid of de media? Vind je die rechtvaardiging overtuigend?
- Denk je dat huidskleur, religie of culturele nabijheid een rol spelen in hoe vluchtelingen worden ontvangen?
- Wat vindt u van deze verschillen? Vind je dat eerlijk of oneerlijk ?

Samenvatting

- Heb je nog vragen of opmerkingen?