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Visual Framing of Afghan Refugees in Global News Media

By Shugofa Dastgeer and Desiree N. Hill

This study content analyzed visual frames of Afghan refugees during the first six months of the Taliban's second regime (from August 15, 2021, to February 15, 2022). A total of N = 1,948 images from the Associated Press were quantitatively analyzed for focal point, topic, tone, depiction, gender, and age. The findings indicate that Afghan refugees were predominantly the primary focal points of the AP images, with significantly more positive and active frames than negative and passive frames. In contrast to previous research on the framing of Afghan women in Western media before the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Afghan women were framed significantly as more positive and active than Afghan men in the photos.

News organizations have focused coverage on Afghanistan and Afghans for decades. In the last 60 years, Afghans have been immigrating across the world due to political changes in Afghanistan and fear of persecution. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), in 2021, Afghans comprised the third largest refugee group in the world (2.6 million), after Syrians (6.8 million) and Venezuelans (4.1 million). During these decades, Afghan refugees have received the Western media's attention in many ways (Fahmy, 2005). One iconic refugee image became known as the Afghan Girl, or the Mona Lisa of Afghanistan. The photo from the 1980s depicts a 12-year-old Afghan refugee with striking green eyes in a Pakistani camp. The photo became the most recognized *National Geographic* photo ever (Suliman, 2021).

The five-year Civil War, and later, the Taliban regime in the 1990s further increased the number of Afghan refugees across the world, and particularly to the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran. With the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, many Afghans returned to Afghanistan and started working in both

government and nongovernment organizations (Dastgeer, 2020). As U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban returned to power, refugees were portrayed in news photos around the world in images of people hanging from evacuation planes and packed into military cargo aircraft (Khurram, 2021).

Existing literature shows that Middle Easterners and Muslims are often framed as negative and passive in Western media compared to the media in the Middle East (e.g., Fahmy, 2004). Studies have found that Afghans—in particular, Afghan women—are portrayed with negative frames, covered from head to toe in burqas and in very poor conditions, for example (Fahmy, 2004, 2010). Some have even argued that showing such images of Afghans in the media helped the U.S. government change the American public opinion in favor of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks (Fahmy, 2004). A review of academic databases—including Academic Search Premier, JSTOR, ProQuest Central, Sage, WorldCat, and others—found only two other studies regarding media framing of Afghans (Jiwani, 2009; Willner-Reid, 2015), but no research studying visual framing of Afghans (in particular, Afghan refugees) in Western media

since 2006 (Fahmy, 2004; Ross-Sheriff, 2006). This study seeks to address that gap.

Images have been important tools in news and media studies since the mid-1900s (Bennett, 2012). Visuals are powerful not only in making the news attractive (Fahmy, 2004; Nabi, 2002) but also in describing news events visually in ways so that people can feel more connected to them (Fahmy, 2005; Garber, 2006). Studies on visual framing in news suggest that journalists and news media use visual content to illustrate the situations and events to viewers, and these illustrations are not free of subjective decision making, both during and after producing the visual content (Dastgeer & Gade, 2016). Images are powerful tools in shaping people's attitudes, perceptions, and even behaviors regarding conflicts and crisis and whether to support or oppose those involved in such issues (Ojala, Pantti, & Kangas, 2017). In other words, images are more powerful than text in shaping the public perception about wars (Powell, Boomgaarden, de Swert, & de Vreese, 2015), and thus, have played a fundamental role in modern warfare (Roger, 2013).

In addition, conducting quantitative visual analysis is important, because compared to framing analyses of text on news media, there have been fewer studies of visuals (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 2009). Furthermore, most visual analyses are qualitative, and researchers have conducted fewer quantitative studies of the portrayal of Afghans in Western media (Ayotte & Husain, 2005; Cloud, 2004; Fahmy, 2005; Falah, 2005; Rantanen, 2005; Ross-Sheriff, 2006).

This study seeks to explore visual framing of Afghan refugees in Western media in the six months after the U.S. withdrawal. The purpose of the study is to examine how the largest news agency in the world, the Associated Press (AP), portrayed Afghan refugees through visual imagery during this time (About Us, n.d.). The images will be examined based on tone, depiction, gender, and age to see how positive/negative and active/passive refugees were framed.

Historical Background

The volatile history of Afghanistan, particularly beginning in the late 1970s, led to regular news coverage from Western media (Tondo & Hilaire, 2021). In 1979, Afghanistan fell into communism, and the United States and its allies (such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) started supporting the anti-communist rebels known as the Mujahedeen (Dastgeer, 2020). The

communist regime and the welcoming environment for anti-communist rebels led to a surge of Afghan refugees to Pakistan, Iran, the United States, and Europe. In the first half of the 1990s, Afghanistan was going through a civil war after the fall of the communist regime in 1991. After the end of the communist regime, Afghanistan was no longer a prominent topic of discussion in Western media, as the United States and its allies were no longer interested in the country. The civil war in Afghanistan did not attract much attention in Western media, but it led to the migration of millions of Afghans to neighboring countries and other parts of the world and made headlines (Dastgeer, 2020).

In the second half of the 1990s, the Taliban took power in most parts of Afghanistan and imposed an extremist Islamic regime in the country, more than Saudi Arabia and Iran, which forbade women from getting an education and working outside the home. All these domestic wars led more Afghans to flee the country and become refugees across different parts of the world. It was not until the 9/11 attacks in the United States that the Western media returned its attention to Afghanistan and its people.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, brought Afghans—in particular, women covered by the burqa—to the top of international news headlines (Fahmy, 2010). Besides several pictures of real Afghan women under the burqa in the news media, there were many nondocumentary pictures, cartoons, and caricatures of the women with insulting captions on the Internet (Rantanen, 2005). Fahmy (2004) conducted an analysis of the depiction of Afghan women in AP images during the Taliban regime and after its collapse. Her findings showed that, after the fall of the Taliban, Afghan women were framed as more “involved, interactive, more socially intimate and symbolically equal to the viewer” than during the Taliban regime (p. 91).

However, the majority of photographs after the collapse of the Taliban still showed Afghan women covered by the burqa, described as a sign of “repression,” “dehumanization,” and backwardness in Western culture (p. 94). Ayotte and Husain (2005) defined the burqa visuals as the “universal” symbol of Afghan women across the world to legitimize the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks (p. 15). The burqa portrayed Afghan women as enslaved, victimized, and insecure “others” who needed liberation from the Taliban (p. 113). Cloud (2004) also argued that pictures of the burqa Afghan women helped President George W. Bush gain strong support of Americans to

invade Afghanistan in 2001 by creating an “irrational” connection between “superior and inferior civilizations” (p. 299).

There were two factors behind such misrepresentations of Afghan women in Western media. First, cultural, ideological values of journalists and news media are important predictors of bias in news coverage of other nations in media (Dastgeer & Gade, 2016; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Second, the foreign policy of countries is a key predictor about the tone of media coverage toward others (Entman, 2003; Gade & Ferman, 2011; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004).

In 2021, when the United States left Afghanistan after 20 years, the narrative of the Afghan War was not the same in Western media (Bowman, 2021; Schaeffer, 2022). In other words, the United States was no longer at war with the Taliban; instead, the Americans left Afghanistan based on a peace deal with the Taliban (Rondeaux, 2022). As a result, despite the fear of Taliban’s return to power and oppression of women and men in Afghanistan, Western countries and Western media did not have a reason to focus on the brutality of living under the Taliban, which included public killings, terror attacks, and the limitation of women’s participation in all aspects of public life (Goldbaum & Zucchini, 2022; Instability in Afghanistan, 2022). However, these atrocities were catalysts, driving hundreds of thousands of Afghan citizens to flee their home country, which is the crux of this study: how a large news organization framed the refugees through visual imagery.

Theoretical Framework

Framing refers to the process of describing certain aspects of news issues with “keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols and visual images” (Entman, 1991, p. 7). Frames are “situations that are built up in accordance with principles of organization, which govern events and our subjective involvement in them” (Goffman, 1974, p. 10). These frames make it difficult for a “typical inexpert audience” to make its own independent interpretations of an event (Entman, 1991, p. 8). In other words, frames consist of “important judgments, agency, identification, categorization and generalization” that cannot be detected easily by regular citizens (Entman, 1991, p. 25). In addition, the receivers might not have the same understanding of the messages as the senders think. Therefore, people often perceive the media frames based on their own cultural perceptions (Entman, 1993).

Visual Framing

According to Entman (2004), words and images play the most important roles in news frames, because they have the capacity to stimulate the news message in favor of or against political competitors. He also noted that words and images can frame world events as highly “understandable,” “memorable,” and culturally influential in a society (p. 6).

Chong and Druckman (2007) called frames nothing more than “adjectives” that are stronger, “superior,” and applicable, while often conveying “exaggerations,” “symbols, endorsements, and links to partisanship and ideology” (p. 111).

Coleman and Banning (2006) argued that visual frames are as effective as verbal frames, because “stories are often complex combinations of visual and verbal content, and in some instances the visual information is so powerful that the verbal attributes can be overwhelmed” (p. 314). However, the general impact of a mixture of frames can be different from the individual influence of each of these frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Powell et al., 2015).

The Biases of Photography

According to Barnett (2003), the bias of media in the framing of visuals occurs on two occasions. First, this bias can happen before the image is taken, with “lighting,” “camera angles,” and “placement of the subject” in the frame. The second type of media bias can occur after capturing of the photo by “digital manipulation” (p. 108). In this stage the photographs can be manipulated by using certain software, “cropping,” and “changing the speed of video” (p. 108). Moreover, “lightness” means happiness, whereas dark gives an impression of “sadness or foreboding.”

There are two key elements in visual framing, which are briefly reviewed below. First, visual frames can portray subjects positively or negatively, depending on the body movements or nonverbal expressions (Amores, Calderón, & Stanek, 2019; Mandel & Shaw, 1973; Powell et al., 2015). Parrott, Hoewe, Fan, and Huffman (2019) studied the visual framing of refugees in the news media and found that the refugees are often portrayed as normal people.

Coleman and Banning (2006) analyzed the importance of visual gestures of Al Gore and George W. Bush during the 2000 presidential campaigns on network television. These scholars found that positive nonverbal expressions of

Gore on broadcast media gave a more positive image of him to the audience, whereas negative nonverbal expressions of Bush increased the negative feelings of the audience regarding him. According to Coleman and Banning, positive gestures influenced the U.S. public to view Gore as more “hopeful and proud,” “moral,” “knowledgeable,” “intelligent,” “caring,” and “stronger” (p. 320). However, the negative nonverbal gestures of Bush made people “feel more angry and afraid” about him and to describe him as a dishonest leader (p. 320).

Furthermore, a study of Syrian refugees in Western media found that migrants were portrayed significantly more negatively on CNN and Der Spiegel (Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017). This study was conducted during the immigration crisis in Europe in the peak of war in Syria.

Second, subjects can be depicted as active or passive in visual frames. Movements such as helping others physically, sympathetically, and economically, teaching, ordering, attacking, fighting, or leading others frame the subjects as active (Coleman, 2010; Fahmy, 2005; Falah 2005). However, if subjects are photographed with motionless, shy and quiet poses, while receiving aid or help from others, or while crying, begging, or thinking or carefully watching a certain point in motionless ways, they are framed as passive (Bullock & Jafari, 2000; Coleman, 2010; Fahmy, 2005; Falah 2005; Goffman, 1976; Rantanen, 2005; Ross-Sheriff, 2006). Furthermore, women and children captured while being arrested by armed officers, or carried by men and women are also considered passive.

In addition, facial expressions give emotion to the image (Bennett, 2012; Coleman, 2010; Hoy, 1986). Moreover, Fahmy (2004) and Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) argued that visual subordination, point of view, social distance, imaginary contact, behavior, and general contact are the stylistic elements of visual framing. Zillmann, Knobloch, and Yu (2001) found that people tend to read news stories accompanied with visual images, especially with “photographs depicting victimization” more than stories without visuals (p. 301). These scholars added that visual images “depicting victimization” encourage the audience to read the news stories and spend more time in reading (p. 301).

Gender and age are other factors that have been widely discussed in relation to visual framing for decades (Dastgeer & Gade, 2016; Fahmy, 2004; Gibson, 2022; Goffman, 1976). Goffman (1979) listed the traditional gender frames of both adults and children as superiority of men over women;

men ordering, leading, and instructing women; subordination of women to households and obedience to men; or passive, anxious, emotional, and vulnerable creatures (full of excitement, sadness, and tears) that need the help of men. Goffman also highlighted the stereotypical frames of girls as followers of their mothers versus boys as independent individuals like their fathers. According to Goffman, men are often portrayed as strong “central figures” of the family, whereas women are framed as their “backups” (1979, p. 40). Hence, women are usually positioned behind men in photographs, and when men are behind women, they often have their arms around women to show women as the “social property” of men (p. 54).

Irom, Borah, and Gibbons (2022) analyzed visual framing of Rohingya refugees in newspapers in Bangladesh, Canada, Pakistan, and the United States. They found no significant difference in the visual framing based on culture, as both South Asian and Western newspapers emphasized stereotypical gender stereotypes of mother–child and other vulnerabilities of the refugees in their coverage.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Afghan people have dominated news images about refugees in the media around the world for several decades (Dastgeer & Gade, 2016; Fahmy, 2004). Based on existing literature, cultural–ideological factors and foreign policies of countries can be predictors of media framing of international news (Amores et al., 2019; Dastgeer & Gade, 2016; Fahmy, 2004; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). In other words, if a country supports a certain issue at the international level, the media in that country is more likely to have positive coverage of that issue and vice versa (Entman, 2003; Wanta et al., 2004).

Based on the foreign policies of most Western countries, the Western media often portrayed Afghans as more negative and passive in visual images (Fahmy, 2004). In 2021, the United States and its allies decided to completely withdraw from Afghanistan, which changed the political landscape, as the “war” had ended between the two countries. Thus, the following hypotheses and research questions are posed regarding the first six months of the Taliban’s second regime from August 15, 2021, to February 15, 2022.

H1: Afghan refugees were portrayed significantly as more positive than negative in the visual images.

RQ1: How were Afghan refugees framed by

gender in relation to tone in the visual images?

RQ2: How were Afghan refugees framed by age in relation to tone in the visual images?

H2: Afghan refugees were portrayed significantly as more active than passive in the visual images.

RQ3: How was the gender of Afghan refugees framed by depiction in the visual images?

RQ4: How were Afghan refugees framed by age in relation to depiction in the visual images?

RQ5: How was the tone of the photos of Afghan refugees associated to the depiction of these refugees?

Methodology

Sample

This study content analyzed visual images of Afghan refugees in Western media during the first six months of the Taliban's second regime (August 15, 2021, to February 15, 2022). Researchers selected this time frame to study the refugee migration as the crisis worsened. More than 3 million Afghans were displaced in Afghanistan by the end of 2021, and 2.7 million were on the move around the world (Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained, 2022).

The researchers selected AP's visual image bank for a number of reasons. This study builds on Fahmy's (2004) visual framing research on Afghan refugees, in which AP photographs were studied. In addition, AP is the largest news agency in the world, with 250 locations (About Us, n.d.). During the six-month time frame, 2,592 photos were published in relation to Afghan refugees, from which 1,948 included Afghan refugees, and these were analyzed in this study. Researchers selected photos that referred specifically to Afghan refugees, migrants, and laborers for analysis in the study using the descriptions provided by AP for selection and identification.

Measures

One researcher gathered the photos. The other coded the images based on a code book developed by the researchers together based on existing literature and similar samples. The researchers discussed the definitions of each

measure to ensure consistency and agreement.

The variables were positive/negative framing, active/passive depiction, gender, and age. Positive/negative framing referred to portrayals of the subject in a positive, neutral, or negative way (Coleman & Banning, 2006; Mandel & Shaw, 1973; Powell et al., 2015). "Positive" included images portraying smiling faces, human agency, purpose, and accomplishment. Negative images were those that showed sadness, jail imagery, or abject poverty. In a few cases, the photo might have both positive and negative imagery, such as a happy group of children in an impoverished environment. In cases like this, the coders selected the predominant frame suggested by the photograph as a whole. Neutral images were those that were neither positive nor negative in tone, such as people boarding an airplane.

The variable of visual depiction was defined as active, passive, or neutral (Amores et al., 2019; Bullock & Jafari, 2000; Corinne, 2007; Fahmy, 2005; Falah 2005; Goffman, 1976; Powell et al., 2015; Rantanen, 2005; Ross-Sheriff, 2006). Active images included those in which the person portrayed was physically in movement or in control of the scene. Examples include photos in which individuals were protesting with energetic body movement holding signs above their heads and standing, or doing work or activities, such as martial arts. Passive imagery encompassed photos in which individuals were shown in weak and powerless conditions, such as seated with police above them or immobile in a tent with no possessions (Goffman, 1979). Neutral images regarding visual depiction involved those neither active nor passive, such as a person receiving a Covid test.

In some cases, a photo might contain both positive and negative imagery, or both active and passive. For example, if one subject in the photo is standing holding a protest sign and another individual is seated in a passive posture, this photo might be coded either active or passive. The final decision was made by the researchers based on the predominant focal image and overall context of the photo. Gender was categorized as male, female, both male and female, and other. Age was categorized as child, adult, both child and adult, and other (see Appendix A).

Intercoder Reliability

The second author was the primary coder and coded all the images (n = 1,948). To ensure intercoder reliability, the first author analyzed 10% (195 images) of the total sample, as

Table 1 Topic of the Photos in Relation to Positive/Negative Frames

Tone	Refugees	Topic Migration	Labor	Total
Negative	225 (12.2%)	33 (55.0%)	6 (12.5%)	264 (13.6%)
Neutral	1,085 (59.0%)	17 (28.3%)	39 (81.3%)	1,141 (58.6%)
Positive	530 (28.8%)	10 (16.7%)	3 (6.3%)	543 (27.9%)
Total	1,840	60	48	1,948

$\chi^2 = 103.433$; $df = 4$; $p < .001$.

recommended by Wimmer and Dominic (2011). Cohen's kappa analysis showed good to high levels of agreement between the two coders for gender (.910), age (.907), tone (.893), and depiction (.775). The reason for the high levels of agreement might be the fact that both authors worked on developing the code book together and practiced coding until they reach 80% of agreement before the actual coding process.

Results

Photos of Afghan refugees on the AP website from more than 26 countries were retrieved. The countries where these AP photos were taken were Afghanistan, Albania, Bosnia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, Uzbekistan, and the Vatican. Of all the photos, 96% had Afghan refugees in them, while 4% had objects and items related to Afghan refugees. The individuals were identified using the AP description: 94.5% were about Afghan refugees, 3% were about the migration of Afghans, and 2.5% were about labor workers outside Afghanistan.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that Afghan refugees were significantly framed as more positive than negative by topic of the photo. A chi-square analysis supported the prediction, $\chi^2 = 103.433$; $df = 4$; $p < .001$. As Table 1 shows, in 58.6% of the photos, Afghan refugees were portrayed predominantly with neutral frames, 27.9% with positive, and 13.6% with negative. Labor (81.3%) was significantly framed with more neutral frames than refugees (59%) and migration (28.3%). Migration was significantly framed as more negative (55%) than refugees (12.2%) and

labor (12.5%). Images of refugees (28.8%) were significantly framed as more positive than labor (6.3%), and migration (16.7%).

Research Question 1 asked how the gender of Afghan refugees was portrayed in relation to positive/negative frames. A chi-square test found significant differences among gender groups in the photos ($\chi^2 = 162.226$; $df = 6$; $p < .001$). As Table 2 shows, women are significantly framed as more positive (37.7%) in the photos than men (25.4%) and mixed-gender photos (27%). Men were framed significantly as more negative than the mixed groups (4.7%) and women (9.1%). The photos with a mix of Afghan men and women were framed significantly as more neutral (68.2%) than the photos of Afghan men (50%) and women (53.2%) alone.

Research Question 2 asked how the age of Afghan refugees was portrayed in relation to positive/negative frames. There were significant differences between different age groups in the photos ($\chi^2 = 122.891$; $df = 6$; $p < .001$). As shown on Table 3, photos with a mix of Afghan adults and children were significantly framed as more neutral (72.8%) than photos of Afghan adults (49.4%) and Afghan children (53.6%). The photos with Afghan adults (33.1%) and Afghan children (31.3%) were significantly framed as more positive than the mixed photos (21.7%). Similarly, the photos of adults (17.6%) and children (15.2%) alone were significantly framed as more negative than the mixed photos (5.4%).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that Afghan refugees were significantly framed as more active than passive by topic in the photos, which was supported ($\chi^2 = 71.080$; $df = 4$; $p < .001$). As Table 4 illustrates, in photos on the topic of migration, Afghans were framed significantly as more active (80%) than

Table 2 Gender of Afghan Refugees in Relation to Positive/Negative Frames

Tone	Gender				Total
	Male	Female	Mixed	Other	
Negative	169 (24.3%)	42 (9.1%)	31 (4.7%)	22 (16.5%)	264 (13.6%)
Neutral	350 (50.3%)	247 (53.2%)	447 (68.2%)	97 (72.9%)	1,141 (58.6%)
Positive	177 (25.4%)	175 (37.7%)	177 (27.0%)	14 (10.5%)	543 (27.9%)
Total	696	464	655	133	1,948

$\chi^2 = 162.226$; $df = 6$; $p < .001$.

Table 3 Ages of Afghan Refugees in Relation to Positive/Negative Frames

Tone	Age				Total
	Adult	Child/Children	Mixed	Other	
Negative	178 (17.6%)	34 (15.2%)	33 (5.4%)	19 (18.3%)	264 (13.6%)
Neutral	500 (49.4%)	120 (53.6%)	442 (72.8%)	79 (76.0%)	1,141 (58.6%)
Positive	335 (33.1%)	70 (31.3%)	132 (21.7%)	6 (5.8%)	543 (27.9%)
Total	1,013	224	607	104	1,948

$\chi^2 = 122.891$; $df = 6$; $p < .001$.

the photos of refugees (30.8%) and labor (62.5%). Likewise, photos of Afghan migrants were framed significantly as more passive (11.7%) than photos on refugees (5.5%). Photos on the topic of refugees were significantly framed as more neutral (63.6%) than photos on migration (18.3%) and labor (37.5%).

Research Question 3 asked how the Afghan refugees were framed by gender in relation to photos' depiction. Significant differences were found between gender categories based on image depiction ($\chi^2 = 158.383$; $df = 6$; $p < .001$). Photos of mixed Afghan men and women were significantly framed as more neutral (74.8%) than photos of men (48.6%) and women (55%). Afghan men were significantly framed as more passive (9.3%) than mixed-gender photos (2%) and women (5.4%). Men were framed significantly as more active (42.1%) than mixed

groups (23.2%), but the difference between the men's active photos and women's active photos (39.7%) was not significant (see Table 5).

Research Question 4 asked how the Afghan refugees were framed by age in relation to image depiction. There were significant differences among age groups by depiction ($\chi^2 = 188.781$; $df = 6$; $p < .001$). As Table 6 illustrates, Afghan adults were significantly framed as more active (43.2%) and passive (8.6%) than children (30.4%) and (1.3%) and mixed-age photos (21.1%) and (3%). Mixed-age photos were significantly framed as more neutral (75.9%) and adults (48.2%). This finding indicates that photos with Afghan children were framed as more neutral than photos with Afghan adults alone.

Research Question 5 asked about the relationship of the positive/negative frames and depiction in

Table 4 Topic of the Photos in Relation to Depiction

Active/Passive	Refugees	Topic Migration	Labor	Total
Passive	102 (5.5%)	7 (11.7%)	0 (0%)	109 (5.6%)
Neutral	1,171 (63.6%)	11 (18.3%)	18 (37.5%)	1,200 (61.6%)
Active	567 (30.8%)	42 (80.0%)	30 (62.5%)	639 (32.8%)
Total	1,840	60	48	1,948

$\chi^2 = 71.080; df = 4; p < .001.$

Table 5 Gender of Afghan Refugees in Relation to Depiction

Active/Passive	Gender				Total
	Male	Female	Mixed	Other	
Passive	65 (9.3%)	25 (5.4%)	13 (2.0%)	6 (4.5%)	109 (5.6%)
Neutral	338 (48.6%)	255 (55.0%)	490 (74.8%)	117 (88.0%)	1,200 (61.6%)
Active	293 (42.1%)	184 (39.7%)	152 (23.2%)	10 (7.5%)	639 (32.8%)
Total	696	464	655	133	1,948

$\chi^2 = 162.226; df = 6; p < .001.$

the photos of Afghan refugees. There were significant differences between categories on photos' tone in relation to depiction ($\chi^2 = 1331.427; df = 4; p < .001$). As Table 7 shows, photos with neutral tones were more significantly depicted as neutral (88.2%) than photos with positive (13.4%) and negative (45.8%) tone. Photos with a positive tone were significantly depicted as more active (86.2%) than photos with neutral (9.3%) and negative (24.6%) tone. Meanwhile, photos with negative tone were significantly depicted as more passive than photos with positive (0.4%) and neutral (2.5%) tone.

Discussion

This study analyzed how Afghan refugees were framed in visual images in Western media during the first six months of the Taliban's second regime in Afghanistan. Framing plays a key role

in visual storytelling, as there are conscious and unconscious subjectivities that journalists and news media have encoded in them (Entman, 2003; Fahmy, 2004, 2010). Compared to previous studies on visual framing of Afghans in Western media (Fahmy, 2004, 2005; 2010; Falah 2005; Rantanen, 2005; Ross-Sheriff, 2006), the findings of this study suggest that the change in Western countries' policies regarding Afghanistan after the 20-year war impacted the way one of the largest news agencies in the world portrayed Afghan refugees.

The United States' and the West's involvement and withdrawal from Afghanistan was complicated by factors such as fear of another 9/11, an attempt to "nation-build," and a deceptive peace in the country after the Taliban and Al Qaeda were quelled. During the two decades of U.S. occupation, a pattern of progress

Table 6 Ages of Afghan Refugees in Relation to Depiction

Tone	Age				Total
	Adult	Child/Children	Mixed	Other	
Negative	87 (8.6%)	3 (1.3%)	18 (3.0%)	1 (1.0%)	109 (5.6%)
Neutral	488 (48.2%)	153 (68.3%)	461 (75.9%)	98 (94.2%)	1,200 (61.6%)
Positive	438 (43.2%)	68 (30.4%)	128 (21.1%)	5 (4.8%)	639 (32.8%)
Total	1,013	224	607	104	1,948

$\chi^2 = 188.781; df = 6; p < .001.$

Table 7 Tone of the Photos in Relation to Depiction

Active/Passive	Tone			Total
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	
Passive	78 (29.5%)	29 (2.5%)	2 (0.4%)	109 (5.6%)
Neutral	121 (45.8%)	1,006 (88.2%)	73 (13.4%)	1,200 (61.6%)
Active	65 (24.6%)	106 (9.3%)	468 (86.2%)	639 (32.8%)
Total	264	1,141	543	1,948

$\chi^2 = 1331.427; df = 4; p < .001.$

and setbacks toward stabilization emerged. Then, in 2011, the killing of Osama bin Laden created an impression by the U.S. government and citizens that the “mission had been accomplished,” and “the Taliban could see how eager the Americans were to get out and so bided its time” (Kagan, 2021, para. 15 & para. 22).

After the U.S. withdrawal, which created the humanitarian crisis illustrated by the photos in this research, a majority of Americans signalled they were open to accepting refugees, including Afghans, into the United States (Lipka, 2022). These factors affect the conscious and unconscious biases that contribute to the work of visual journalists, including the finding in this study that refugees were framed with more positive than negative imagery and more active than passive (e.g., Entman, 2003).

Previous studies have found that news organization images of refugees and migrants can have a negative frame (e.g., Amores et al., 2019), but one difference between this study and others is that it was more inclusive of a wide variety of geographic regions. Amores et al. (2019), for example, focused on some European countries where refugees were viewed as burdens by areas with more migration. In this example, countries on other continents began to transport and welcome Afghan refugees, creating more positive imagery.

However, similar to the previous studies with negative depictions (such as Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017), migrants were portrayed significantly more negatively than refugees overall, 55% to 12.2%, which illustrates the extreme conditions the migrating refugees face.



Figure 1 An Afghan refugee kickboxer poses for a photo in Tehran, Iran (©AP Photo/Morteza Nikoubazl).

Male refugees were framed in a more negative tone than female, at 37.7% to 25.4%. Female subjects were depicted in some cases taking more control of their lives in nontraditional ways through athletics. Examples included kickboxers and Paralympic athletes. The findings of this research may signal that the stereotype of the Afghan burqa woman is fading. This finding is different from Fahmy's (2004) on visual framing of Afghan women at the beginning of the Afghan war as passive, oppressed, veiled, and victimized. As an example, Figure 1 shows a female athlete posing for a portrait-style photo in Iran.

On the other hand, male refugees were more often photographed surrounded by police and military presence than females. Although females participated in protests in some photos similar to males, more photos showed males curtailed by police, as if they had just committed or were about to commit a crime. Figure 2 is an example of one that depicts the subjects as both negative and passive from a refugee protest in Indonesia. The cries of anguish, the police intervention, and the camera angle showing the individuals in a

low position all contribute to illustrate the plight of the homeless Afghans.

Male migrants were also often depicted in a negative light, particularly when they were apprehended at border crossings by authorities. Police figures may see males as more of a threat than females, which could mean that more photos capture males in a negative light. More males are also in transit due to the dangers posed by overland foot travel for migrants (Asylum Seeker Demography, 2016). Previous research has demonstrated that news organizations are seeking newsworthy photos (e.g. Zillmann et al., 2001). Police and military clustered around refugees (Figure 3) is of more traditional news interest than peaceful-looking female protesters.

Age also revealed differences regarding positive, negative, and neutral tone. Adults and children together were framed more positively than adults or children individually. This may be explained because of activities in which adults and children were together, such as sports and school, which had more positive connotations than a photo in which a child might be portrayed alone in a homeless camp.

The data show that refugees were significantly framed as more active than passive, with the exception of migrants. Active photos showed refugees in a variety of roles, including as competitive athletes, learners, and protesters. As migrants traverse through various precarious situations, they are not able to learn, play sports, or do anything other than get from one place to the next. Although in some situations migrants are active in their travels, they are often portrayed huddled in tents or surrounded by police.

Several photos suggested jail-like conditions in the imagery (e.g., Figures 4 and 5). These included shots taken through fences, windows with bars, and other similar barriers. These photos from Italy, Germany, and India reinforced the separation and other-ness of the individuals, particularly as they tried to make a life in new places.

Overall, this study found the Afghan refugees to be portrayed as situated in a more positive and active frame than in a negative and passive one. This study is in contrast to others in which photographers and media organizations have predominantly focused on negative imagery (e.g., Greenwood & Thomson, 2020). The data here reveal that, when a wider variety of geographic locations are analyzed, in the case of the Afghan refugees, a more positive picture is painted of people who are welcomed, continuing with their



Figure 2 A father clings to his children at a refugee protest in Indonesia (©AP Photo/Donal Husni).



Figure 3 Migrants at a Polish border crossing are watched and surrounded by military (©AP Photo/Jaap Arriens).



Figure 4 Afghan refugees set up in tents at a Red Cross refugee camp in Italy (©AP Photo/Andrew Medichini).

lives, and coping with agency and grace. Previous studies have focused on areas particularly in Europe where refugees flee war-torn countries such as Syria (e.g., Amores et al., 2019). These studies have found migrants and refugees portrayed visually as unwelcome.

While the Afghan refugees are framed in more positive and active lights, of more concern are the Afghan migrants portrayed in unbalanced power relationships with police figures. This research concurs with Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) that these kinds of photos serve to perpetuate stereotypes of people in transit from Third World countries as impoverished and weak. In these images migrants are positioned in a liminal space, somewhere between surviving and becoming.

Limitations

Despite the contributions, this study has a few limitations. First, this study only analyzed still photos of a news agency before publication. Further research should endeavor to connect photos from news services, such as those from the Associated Press, to final publication, to track decisions made by photo editors on what images they select and how they choose to portray them in print and digital publications.

Second, more images from different news services and news organizations can provide a more holistic view of the photographic ecosystem. Third, this study only examined the images of Afghan refugees quantitatively. Future research can explore such images in a multimethod approach of both quantitative and qualitative.

Finally, this study examined visual framing of Afghan refugees in Western media after the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Future research can explore visual framing of Afghans inside Afghanistan before and after the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's takeover.



Figure 5 A child refugee waiting at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany for transport to the United States (©AP Photo/Boris Roessler).

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Appendix A

Codebook

Image Tone:

1. Negative: Looking in poor condition, bleeding, screaming, in need of help, dirty, looking hopeless, jailed or looking like being in a jail
2. Neutral
3. Positive: Welcomed, smiling face, in control of situation, caring for others, looking hopeful

Visual Depiction of Afghan Refugees:

1. Passive: Photographed
 - Motionless and shy
 - Looking down or away from action in image
 - Receiving actions from others
 - Receiving aids and helps from others (men, women or children)
 - Riding in a car/vehicle driven by someone else
 - Being arrested, inspected, tortured, or assaulted by others
 - Walking behind others as if following their order
 - Taught/instructed or led by others
 - Ordered by others
 - Standing inactively among a crowd
 - Back to the camera
 - Wiping tear which makes their face invisible
2. Neutral
3. Active: Afghan refugees photographed while
 - Executing/performing a task (marching, protesting, voting, etc.)
 - Helping (physically or emotionally), giving
 - Caring for and comforting others
 - Ordering or leading others
 - Talking
 - Carrying signs and slogans
 - Chanting
 - Running
 - Instructing or teaching others
 - Attacking or fighting
 - Looking at the camera
 - Praying
 - Other

Age:

1. Adult
 - Looking taller than children
 - Physical features such as bigger breasts (in the case of women), facial maturity, beards, and body hair (in the case of men)

- Wearing headscarves or the hijab (in the case of women)
 - Carrying children
2. Child/children
 - Infants
 - Looking considerably smaller than adults
 - No facial or body hair
 - No breasts
 - Looking very young from facial features
 - Outfits of children are often more childlike than those adults
 3. Mixed: Both adults and children
 4. Other: Inanimate objects, scenery

Gender:

1. Male: Beard, body hair, masculine outfits, based on information from the textual description
2. Female: Hijab, feminine outfits, physical features (such as breasts), and based on information from the textual description
3. Mixed
4. Other: Can't tell, from a distance, from the back

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