A Story Worth Telling: Refugee Voice and Representation in Humanitarian Communication

A Qualitative Analysis on the Construction of the Refugee Subject in Refugee Aid Organizations' Digital Communication

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ABSTRACT

A considerable amount of multidisciplinary studies focusing on refugee representation have brought attention to the one-dimensional nature of refugee representations in both mainstream media and in humanitarian communication. Refugees have had little control over their own representation, as they have been portrayed primarily as victims or threats. More recently, various scholars have noted a particular shift in humanitarian communication. Refugee aid agencies are increasingly committed to voice refugees, and to enhance their agency and self-reliance. However, despite these intentions, several scholars continue to find refugees' mediated visibility to accompany great invisibility. Taking a Foucauldian approach to conceptualize refugee representation, it is suggested that international organizations have the power to produce and shape our knowledge of forced displacement and the 'subjects' who personify this discourse. Within this context, the present study aims to examine how refugees are represented in contemporary humanitarian narratives. By means of qualitative analysis, 42 stories/blogs published on three international refugee organizations' websites will be examined. A multimethod approach – a thematic analysis of textual elements and a semiotic analysis of visual elements – should shed more light on the way that 'the refugee' subject is constructed within digital humanitarian communication; as well as the extent to which refugees' voices are included or excluded.

The findings of this study reveal refugees are most often portrayed as good deserving citizens; an urgent problem; vulnerable victims; and reflections of us. It was found that refugees remain largely silenced as a result of the relationship between refugee agencies and logics of neoliberalism, securitization and colonialism. Despite several attempts to highlight refugees' agency, their agency is found to be limited primarily to participation in market activities. Refugees further remain largely constructed around discourses of vulnerability and dependency. It is suggested that refugees are silenced and excluded on the same conditions that uphold asymmetrical relations between North and South.

KEYWORDS: *Refugees, Representation, Voice, Digital communication, International aid organizations*

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1. INTRODUCTION

". . . it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar"

(Ngozi Adichie, 2009)

Forced migrants gained immense visibility in the Western media around the so-called 'European refugee crisis'. Images of uncontrollable "floods" of displaced people on their way to Europe, crammed in flimsy dinghies, were used to mobilize a rhetoric that Europe's security was in danger (Leurs, Agirreazkuenaga, Smets & Mevsimler, 2020). Around the same time, the photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi's lifeless body, face-down on the beach, brought worldwide attention to the terrible suffering that comes with fleeing war and conflict (Adler-Nissen, Anderson & Hansen, 2020). International humanitarian organizations in particular have played a significant mediating role in communicating what was happening amidst the "crisis", who the people involved were, and how *we*, as Western citizens, ought to feel towards them (Wright, 2019). A growing body of literature recognizes that most of what the Western viewer would learn to know about forced migrants' predicaments, comes from the stories of media professionals and humanitarian organizations. On the contrary, forced migrants hardly ever found to narrate their own subjectivities towards their predicament (Leurs et al., 2020). Scholars criticizing the mediated representations of refugees make note of how these depictions tend to strategically engage with one side of a story, and consequently disregard other sides (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2017; Georgiou, 2018). It is frequently argued that these one-sided, stereotypical depictions uphold distinctions between a Western 'us' and non-Western 'others', in which the latter is a discursive production of the former (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). These narratives are then used by aid institutions as a means of mobilizing monetary donations; set the public agenda; and reach other organizational goals (Ongenaert, 2019). Mediated representations of forced migrants by aid organizations perpetuate and normalize a certain way of thinking about displacement—a discourse, that then legitimizes real life practices, policies and solutions regarding displacement "crises" (Hall, 1997; Krause & Schmidt, 2019). The implications that dominant discourses may ultimately bear for refugees' lives, underline the importance of studying *how*

refugees are portrayed in humanitarian institutions' discursive and visual narratives (Bleiker et al., 2014; Johnson, 2011).

1.1 A shift in the image of 'the refugee'

In previous studies on mediated refugee representation, various strategies or *regimes* have been identified, each in which refugees have been made visible and invisible in different ways (e.g. Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Georgiou, 2018; Nikunen, 2019a). These representation strategies are generally subject to larger trends, encompassing the technological, political and societal level (Ongenaert, 2019). However, as Ongenaert states: "few studies scrutinize, especially in the context of refugee organizations, the shaping role of organizational characteristics, such as core values and principles, funding structure and relationships with states . . . the challenges to meet the media logic . . . or communication practices as reflections of larger technological, political, economic and/or sociocultural shifts in society" (2019, p. 198). It seems relevant in this light for the research to situate 'refugee representation' within a historical context, to gain a better understanding of the political, economic and legal background in which acts of representations take place.

Generally, states, NGOs and international institutions have agreed upon referring to forcibly displaced persons (FDPs, hereafter) as persons "who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence" (IOM, n.d.). Although the term refugee is commonly used interchangeably with "FDP" —the term *refugee* refers explicitly to a legally-recognized status with access to certain rights and conditions. Under the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, one is to be recognized as a refugee, and granted protection, when he/she:

> "owes to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." (UNHCR, 2010, p. 14)

The 1951 Convention can be viewed as the centerpiece of the international refugee regime, under which humanitarian agencies have long operated, as it worked to shape the responses of governments to forced displacement crises; as well as the regulations and operations implemented by aid organizations (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). The Convention was initially written when images of refugees that dominated (Western) society were that of

heroic European individuals in Second World War, fleeing political persecution and oppressive regimes (Johnson, 2011). Post Second World War, an increase in conflicts and developments in areas of the global South called for a revision of the treaty in 1967: a new protocol that gave the Convention universal coverage, and thus expanded aid to displaced people from the global South (UNHCR, 2010). Various scholars (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2010; Johnson, 2011) note how these developments have marked a gradual shift in the West's imaginary of the refugee; which was no longer that of a white European, but of displaced persons from the global South. Simultaneously, refugee aid organizations shifted most of their focus on assisting 'Third-world' refugees. Alongside, a critical discursive shift took place, which Johnson (2011) recognized as the increased racialization and victimization of the refugee. Early forms of humanitarian communication have been criticized for their use of "shock effect" images, which rely mainly "on the language of grand emotions about suffering" (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 108). Aid organizations would largely portray refugees as helpless and suffering victims, a sentiment that works to reproduce the (neo)colonialist notion of 'developing' communities as dependent on the 'developed world's' aid and compassion (Malkki, 2005).

However, various scholars have made note of a rather recent shift in humanitarian communication strategies, one that purportedly moves away from a 'negative' image of refugees and instead focuses on a 'positive' presentation. As a response to criticism to a discourse that presents refugees as helpless and dependent; aid agencies aim to instead depict refugees as actors – self-reliant and resilient (Krause & Schmidt, 2019). These goals are simultaneously reflected in the Global Compact on Refugees, which was adopted in December of 2018 by states, IGOs and NGOs, in an effort to reform international refugee policy (UNHCR, 2018b). Put simply, the Compact served as a response to the growing tendency of several Western nations to tighten their border policies, and even refuse hosting FDPs—violating the basic commitment to refugees under international law (Lehne, 2016). Some of the objectives of the new Compact include; easing pressure on host countries; and enhancing refugees' self-reliance and resilience (UNHCR, 2018b). However, despite intentions to highlight refugees' agency and dignity, scholars make note of how refugees' visibility continues to accompany great invisibility (Appadurai, 2020; Georgiou, 2018; Madianou, 2019). These contemporary images generally ascribe to two main popular rhetorics that dominate much of contemporary discourse: that of *securitization*, that deems refugees as security threats (Georgiou, 2018); and the *neoliberalization of social life*, "in which market value is the chief criterion for membership" (Mavelli, 2018, p. 482). In the

following chapter I aim elaborate how these various logics have translated in strategies of representation.

1.2 Social and scientific relevance and the research question

Particularly starting from 2015, a year which was characterized by a spike in refugees arriving to Europe, the theme of forced displacement has become increasingly relevant for social and political discussions, as well as for policymaking (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). In this context, refugee organizations are often the most important sources of information regarding forced displacement (Ongenaert, 2019). Apart from providing aid and protection to FDPs, organizations seek to inform the public and set the agenda through digital communication (Ongenaert, 2019; Vestergaard, 2014). Studying the public communication of aid organizations is relevant, departing from Ongenaert's (2019) argument that aid agencies' public communication serves not merely as an organizational accessory—in lieu, it forms the foundation and signifier of these organizations. In this view on communication, it is suggested that by studying agencies' discursive practices, one may better grasp what constitutes, produces or changes organizational visions and practices, albeit their policies, values or operations (Ongenaert, 2019).

As noted by Ongenaert (2019), several political and sociocultural shifts have accounted for a shift in the call for solidarity. An example of such relevant societal trends is the rising support for right-wing populist parties and movements in numerous countries (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Among various scholars, Inglehart and Norris (2016) found the populist rhetoric to fuel an anti-immigration attitude in the public. In light of these growing political and public anti-immigration sentiments, refugee organizations have had to strategically adjust their communication strategies (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). It is relevant to study the narratives produced by aid agencies, as these endeavors have been found to significantly contribute to people's perceptions of forced migrants; as well as their support of policy decisions regarding forced migration (Ongenaert, 2019). The support – or lack of support – from the public regarding refugee legislation and policies may ultimately affect the lives of many forced migrants (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019).

Traditional media portrayals of displacement have long been argued to be one-sided, and to dehumanize and stigmatize displaced people (Nikunen, 2019a). Against this background of long-lasting criticism of portraying refugees as speechless and dependent; aid agencies instead increasingly aspire to empower displaced persons by enabling their

participation and promoting their agency (Leurs et al., 2020; Madianou et al., 2015; Wright, 2018). Empowering displaced people to engage in decisions that affect them, through the discussion of their needs and expectations, is a way to address long-lived critiques of humanitarian work as perpetrating a state of dependency and centralized power (Krause & Schmidt, 2019). Allowing for a two-way communication between agencies and affected communities may further improve feedback structures, which would allow displaced people to hold humanitarian institutions accountable when necessary (Madianou et al., 2015). Digital media increasingly serve as a place for counternarratives to emerge – narratives that move away from mainstream, stereotypical portrayals – which focus instead on refugees' humanity and *voice* (Nikunen, 2019a). Digital media can open up the space of appearance, making visible those voices and perspectives, that have not usually been heard in the public sphere (Nikunen, 2019b). Whereas, in the context of the Global Compact, more refugee aid organizations aim to depict refugees as self-sufficient actors; several scholars remain critical of whether these 'positive' representations of refugees actually serve to empower, and voice forced migrants (e.g. Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019). Additionally, while some scholars have argued that humanitarian organizations have largely moved on from representing refugees as helpless victims (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2010, 2017; Musaro, 2017; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019); other studies analyzing contemporary representations have found 'negative' portrayals to remain prevalent (e.g. Krause & Schmidt, 2019). The discrepancies of these findings highlight the need for additional insight on how refugees are represented, particularly in the context of the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018. The criticisms by various scholars towards recent 'positive' representations – particularly relating to their inefficacy to voice refugees – further raise the question whether more recent digital humanitarian communications actually enable more humane and encompassing forms of visibility for refugees (Madianou et al., 2015).

While mainstream news representations of refugees have been widely studied (e.g. Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Franquet Dos Santos Silva et al., 2018), significantly less research has targeted online communication by refugee aid organizations (Ongenaert, 2019). This study thus serves to provide new insights into the ways that these organizations represent refugees on their digital platforms; and how their narratives engage with refugees' voices. More specifically, the research question that will guide the present study is:

How are refugees represented in international refugee organizations' digital communication?

A multimethod research design – a thematic analysis for textual elements, and a semiotic analysis for visual elements – was used in this study to analyze 42 articles posted by three aid organizations on their websites. Considering that a multimethod approach to studying refugee representation by organizations is still relatively uncommon in the field (Ongenaert, 2019; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019); this study could offer a broader and richer understanding of how refugees are positioned visually and discursively in digital narratives.

The following chapter attempts to place the topics of representation and voice in a particular framework, as well as discuss the state-of-the-art on common representation strategies used by aid organizations. Chapter three, then, is dedicated to the explanation and justification of the research design chosen for this study. Subsequently, the findings of the analyses will be presented and discussed, and the final chapter will contain the conclusions and implications of the research.

2. THEORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

2.1 Representations and the construction of the distant 'Other'

Discursive practices of international institutions and NGOs have the power to produce and shape our knowledge of forced displacement and the 'subjects' who personify this discourse (Hall, 1997; Johnson, 2011). This view departs from the early critical accounts of authors such as Spivak (1988), who takes on a postcolonial stance when arguing that Western discursive reproductions of the 'Third World' have strategically positioned the "subaltern" as heterogenous *Others*, with the intent of ever preserving the West as subject. Spivak (1988) pleads that within this condition of sustained dichotomy, our knowledge of the other is produced by Western experts, rather than by their own account. In this argument, Spivak (1988) turns to the influential works of post-structural thinkers such as Michel Foucault. Hall (1997) adopts Foucault's rationale in his conceptualization of representation, more specifically he defines representation as the "production of meaning through language" (p. 14), whereby language can refer to any signs that refer to both 'material' objects and abstract ideas. These meanings, which are thus socially constructed, are vital ways in which people make sense of the world, objects and concepts (Hall, 1997). The meanings we attach to complex phenomena, such as forced displacement and migration, reflect a certain *system of representation*; a system that then regulates and controls how we view and deal with certain concepts and with the subjects involved in forced displacement (Hall, 1997). Foucault (in Hall, 1997) refers to this system of representation as *discourse*, which is defined as "a group of statements which provide . . . a way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment. . . . Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language" (p. 29). Knowledge in this sense is highly embedded in relations of power, as what is regarded 'truth' at a time determines what meanings are legitimated and which ones are excluded (Hall, 1997). Foucault thus speaks "of a discursive formation sustaining a *regime of truth*" (Hall, 1997, p. 34), a certain discourse about a subject that is accepted as reality.

Returning to what this conceptualization means in relation to refugees, Bleiker, Campbell and Hutchinson (2014) note that power relations and the production of knowledge are integral components to the contemporary imagination of refugees, who are primarily presented as either objects of humanitarian concern, or as objects of fear. Humanitarian institutions' representation of refugees have created binary oppositions between the West and the 'Other', framing them in such way to legitimize certain responses and actions, and decide

who is deserving of assistance and who is not (Chouliaraki, 2017; Leurs et al., 2020). Thus, humanitarian discourses involve a complex relationship of politics and power—determining who is visible, who is being heard and who is excluded (Georgiou, 2018, Leurs et al., 2020; Madianou, Longboan & Ong, 2015). While refugees are highly visible in the media landscape, their own accounts are largely absent within normative media representation (Madianou, Longboan & Ong, 2015; Georgiou, 2018). Though images of migratory flows have drawn great attention to the 'issue' of refugees – it is the framing and the practice of 'speaking for' refugees – as either objects of our contemplation, or as dangerous outsiders – that has contributed to a condition in which their multidimensional voices are suppressed in mainstream representations (Bonini Baldini, 2019; Bracke, 2016; Georgiou, 2018). To elaborate further on how FDPs have been represented in institutional discourse, the next part will first move into a discussion of the notion of *voice*. After reviewing the state-of-the-art on mediated refugee visibility, it will be discussed how contemporary discursive practices increasingly aim to highlight FDPs' agency and self-reliance.

2.2 Aid organizations, refugees and voice

2.2.1 The notion of voice

As discussed prior, narratives on refugees by aid institutions possess the power to construct our idea of refugees and displacement crises at large (Bracke, 2016; Johnson, 2011; Georgiou, 2018). What constitutes those narratives and who are the key actors cultivating them? These questions lie at the heart of studies concerned with the incorporation of voice in humanitarian narratives.

Couldry (2010) speaks of voice, broadly, as the ability to give an account to one's life. To give an account of the self means being able to provide a narrative: an agentic and introspective account of one's own identity, actions and objectives (Couldry, 2010; Georgiou, 2018). Couldry (2010) views voice as an inextricable part of human life, which makes the denial of one's opportunity for voice—the denial of a fundamental dimension of human life.

Butler (2015, in Nikunen, 2019b) argues that in order "to have a voice, a space is needed that enables and allows for recognition of that voice . . . a multimodal address: a space of appearance and a mode of expression" (p. 155). In the case of refugee voices, Nikunen (2019b) states an address that moves away from traditional media contexts is necessary, as those mostly 'benefit' from representing refugees as stereotypical others, rather than as multidimensional agents. Butler (2015) and Nikunen (2019b) argue that digital

technologies can help expand the traditional notions of whose voices are considered legitimate, alternately opening up the space of appearance for marginalized voices that may not typically participate in political discussions. Engaging displaced communities to voice their needs and expectations, by allowing their participation in the form of a two-way communication; is a strategy that could be adopted by agencies to help correct the long-standing hierarchical relationship between them and affected communities (Nikunen, 2019b).

More recent accounts of refugee aid organizations attest to "give a voice" to the displaced, however, scholars have put in doubt the actual effectiveness of their voice in the broader public sphere (e.g. Wright, 2018; Georgiou, 2018). One of the criticisms of this notion includes the fundamental rationale behind "giving a voice" to people: it suggests that their voices do not exist until we give it to them; and until we decide to listen, their voice does not have value (Couldry, 2010). In this regard, the present study aims to further investigate what place refugees' voices have, if any, in digital humanitarian representations.

In Couldry's (2010) comprehensive framework on the notion of voice, he uses several principles to define voice, pertaining to what it means to have a voice that is valued and effective. Since the narrative of selfhood is constantly changing over time, Couldry (2010) speaks of voice as a complex process, one that is shaped by various materialities, social and collective practices and political realities (Nikunen, 2019b).

First, having a voice requires certain social and material resources (Couldry, 2010). Apart from language, a certain symbolic status, that provides people with the necessary skills and resources, is required to articulate one's voice in the public (Madianou et al., 2015). Madianou et al (2015) note that possessing media skills is increasingly important for articulating one's voice, since novel communication technologies have become the main sites for exchanges and production of narratives. Given that those resources and skills are disproportionately divided according to one's position in society, it is important to understand and consider the material and social conditions under which the articulation of voice is either facilitated or undermined (Madianou et al., 2015; Nikunen, 2019b).

Secondly, Couldry (2010) views voice as an embodied process. The narrative of the self is inherently unique to the individual, yet it is not a uniform story; an "internal diversity" (p. 9) exists within a voice (Couldry, 2010). This plurality of the voice is oftentimes neglected within humanitarian attempts to give the refugee voice, instead, their narratives are often presented as singular stories (Nikunen, 2019b) Voice cannot just be read from afar, since voice requires an individual's reflexive, embodied account (Couldry, 2010). Couldry

(2010) notes that one-sided portrayals of one's life deny certain dimensions of voice, and therefore fail to recognize voice as a whole, one that has inherent variations.

Whereas voice is in part about individual self-expression, Couldry (2010) argues voice is also closely related to collective action and the struggle for recognition. Previous studies have made note of how refugees, as a social group, speak up about their views in the public sphere, and how they participate in various political and social processes (Madianou et al., 2015). Various scholars (e.g. Georgiou, 2018) addressed how, through histories of oppression and unequal resources, most narratives of refugees have not been theirs to produce and control, but rather that of Western states and institutions.

Couldry (2010) then makes the link to certain processes and realities that do not accommodate voice, but rather block or deny it – an undermining narrative which he refers to as "voice-denying rationalities" (p. 10). Couldry (2010) recognizes such voice-denying rationalities as implicit ways that the structure of an organization, or even of a society, impede voice.

2.2.2 Voice and symbolic bordering

One such way that voice is subtly denied in the structure of organizations and social relations is through the process of *symbolic bordering* (Georgiou, 2018). In Georgiou's (2018) words, "symbolic bordering constitutes the representational practices of exclusion that . . . work to systematically keep migrants and refugees outside its symbolic space of representation and deliberation" (p. 48). In one sense, symbolic bordering reflects the previously described (neo)colonialist tendencies to preserve the West as the central locus of power through mediated narrations (Bracke, 2016; Madianou, 2019a). An alternative parallel to symbolic bordering is the protection of territorial borders, a practice that has become increasingly relevant for Western states in a post-refugee 'crisis' context (Georgiou, 2018). Western states have become particularly concerned with security – of their economies, cultural identities and values. In this discourse, the border becomes an increasingly relevant (symbolic) place: dangerous 'others' have to be kept outside of 'our' borders (Beck, 2017).

In an attempt to reinforce securitization, various digital technologies are increasingly utilized by states and aid NGOs in the name of geopolitical protection of borders (Leurs et al., 2020). Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2019) state that discursive representational practices by aid organizations indirectly work to regulate borders through distinct narrations of refugees and of the border. In accordance with institutional aims, images and narratives by aid NGOs

may depict refugees as worthy victims, who stand in stark contrast with unworthy evil-doers (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017; Leurs et al., 2020). In both instances, refugees are deemed as 'others', as objects that are to be either accepted or denied from the 'outside' to the 'inside' (Georgiou, 2018). The normative representational order thus hardly engages with refugees' voices, and when it does, it is only of those regarded as worthy enough of voice (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Georgiou, 2018). The notions of worthy versus unworthy figures, together with the silencing of voices, will be further engaged with in the following section where various representation strategies are reviewed and critically examined.

2.3 Visibility/invisibility paradox: humanitarian representation strategies

"The torture of being the unseen object, and the constantly observed subject" —writer Amiri Bakara writes in 1965 (p. 158), a notion that works to remind us of what Malkki (1995, 2005) describes later as the *architecture of silence* (also referred to as *strategic silence*). As outlined earlier, various social and political developments that took place post-World War II have led to the strategic placement of refugees as maximally distant others in humanitarian communication practices (Malkki, 1995, 2005; Kapoor, 2004; Johnson, 2011; Rajaram, 2002). Malkki (1996) notes particular representations of refugees have produced strategic silence, a state in which immense visibility of refugees in the media is accompanied by invisibility and silence. This visibility/invisibility paradox is characterized by a heightened visibility of certain categories of mobile populations, in which other aspects are purposefully neglected (Leurs et al., 2020). For example, a news story that narrates refugees as homogenized masses, will often strategically disregard their individuality (Horsti, 2016). Similarly, mainstream media would produce shocking accounts of refugees' suffering, with little regard for the historical causes of conflicts or other complex principles behind forced migration (Nikunen, 2019a). In this state of strategic silence, media professionals and aid organizations have the power to create an image of the refugee as a floating, ambivalent figure (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Leurs et al., 2020). Refugees are hardly ever depicted as humans, instead, either as anonymous masses, as apolitical victims or as threats (Nikunen, 2019a). The ambiguous nature of media representations is often not unintentional; images of refugees as helpless victims mobilize different responses from the targeted audience, than the portrayal of refugees as dangerous threats (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). The symbolical, ever instable image of the refugee, works to remind the audience that who we once knew as the vulnerable refugee child, may

easily turn into a hostile terrorist—the former demanding our care, the latter our fear (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019).

The ambiguity surrounding mainstream media representations of refugees has been widely studied by various scholars (e.g. Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Nikunen, 2019a). Less scholars however have focused on digital media representations by humanitarian organizations (Ongenaert, 2019). Generally, what is known about humanitarian representations rests primarily on case studies of humanitarian mass media campaigns (e.g. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019; Johnson, 2011; Richey, 2018); policy documents (e.g. Krause & Schmidt, 2019); and press releases (e.g. Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). A smaller body of research examines digital media narratives by aid organizations (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2012a, 2017; Georgiou, 2018). Wright (2018, 2019) argues that the lines – between mainstream news media and humanitarian communication – are increasingly blurring, in that aid agencies are now not only sources of news, but also co-producers of it. Not only are aid organizations presently recruiting many journalists; the culture and structure of these organizations are arguably becoming more congruent with that of mainstream media (Wright, 2019). The latter becomes apparent in that aid NGOs will repeatedly rely on "journalistic logics", such as the creation of newsworthy spectacles, as well as the use of highly aestheticized imagery, grand narratives and celebrity advocacy (Wright, 2019). The interconnectedness of aid agencies and news media underlines the need to study what is already known in the field about mainstream representations of refugees, to hopefully learn more about how digital humanitarian narratives strategically present displacement.

This section sets out to explore and review various regimes of visibility and invisibility that have been recognized by scholars in mainstream (news) media and humanitarian public communication. The following categories are mostly based on regimes of visibility as proposed by Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017), who studied images of refugees produced by European news outlets. Over time, various authors who have studied mainstream media and humanitarian communication have also come up with similar categorizations, as will be discussed in this section.

2.3.1 Regime of biological life

In the past century, Johnson (2011) and Malkki (2005) argue how the dominant image of refugees from the global South became one of poverty-stricken masses, fleeing corruption and war. Refugees in this regime are made visible as anonymous masses, and they are often

referred to discursively as 'hordes', 'floods' and 'flows' in mainstream media (Johnson, 2011). Johnson (2011) describes there is a decided absence of a unique, individual humanity. Where Malkki (2005) refers to this regime of representation as an "anonymous corporeality" (p. 388), Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) refer to it as visibility as biological life—images that, according to the scholars, have the symbolic power to reduce "human bodies as living matter, subject to humanitarian benevolence of the West" (p. 1167). To extend on that, Brun (2016) makes a distinction between a focus on biological lives and a focus on biographical lives—where the former relates to the reductive notion of lives as bodies, and the latter is understood as "the ability to act within or upon the forces that shape and restrict our possibilities to reach a desired future" (p. 399). An understanding of refugees strictly in notions of biological life thus decontextualizes the predicaments in which displaced people find themselves, whereas a biographical understanding views those predicaments as relational phenomena taking place within a particular story (Brun, 2016).

      A way mainstream media is commonly found to focus on refugees as biological lives, is by presenting them in numbers and charts (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Nikunen, 2019a). Technological advantages in the last decades have facilitated the collection and analysis of big data in tracking people's movements; making visible, for example, the quantities, directions and locations of people migrating (Nikunen, 2019a). Nikunen (2019a), who studied the media's coverage of refugees, found that a substantial amount of the coverage included various maps, figures and infographs, depicting refugee routes. These images would include arrows with numerical values, with bigger arrows for larger numbers, to some degree signifying the floods and flows of masses (Nikunen, 2019a). Though the use of numerical data would appear as unbiased and value free, Broome and Quirk (2015) note the problem with such 'politics of numbers' in the wake of globalisation, is that they serve to universalize and simplify the complexity of social phenomena and developmental issues. The growing use of benchmarking – as Broome and Quirk (2015) refer to this application of metrics – as a strategic tool, operates with the productive power that guides us in how we think of development issues through a particular lens. The reduction of forced migration movements to numbers and charts disregards the embodied accounts and critical reflections that accompany such movements, leaving no space for FDPs voices. What is further problematic is that the practice of benchmarking does not require expertise or understanding of local culture, experiences and perspectives (Broome & Quirk, 2015), further undermining FDPs' value as actors with voice (Brun, 2016; Nikunen, 2019a).

2.3.2 Regime of empathy

In contrast to massification, a regime that places emphasis on intimate images of innocent-looking individuals, oftentimes women and suffering children, plays into the empathy and pity of the Western spectator to mobilize action (Chouliaraki, 2010; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Wright, 2019). Historically, women and children have symbolized ultimate vulnerability, being the 'ideal victims' (Chouliaraki, 2010), dependent and in need of protection (Johnson, 2011). The composition of the 'refugee woman and child' have therefore tactically been utilized by agencies as a tool to mobilize donations and compassion (Johnson, 2011).

Chouliaraki (2010, 2017) states that humanitarian mass media campaigns have relied largely on the 'aesthetics of suffering': images in which mainly women and children are depicted as 'raw', exposed bodies, asking for help, devoid of voice or any personal characteristics. Stories that have gained immense public attention, such as the one of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who drowned on a beach in Turkey in September 2015, work to remind us of the sheer horrors of forced displacement and the suffering of refugees and migrants. Although these shock-effect images have the power to raise public awareness, the nature of these images make for a social relationship of maximal distance between the Western spectator and the suffering other (Chouliaraki, 2010, 2017). Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) argue refugees are infantilized through these imageries – demonstrating their powerlessness, and lack of agency and voice – yet also "echoing the colonial paternalism where the adult-Northerner offers help and knowledge to the infantilized-South" (Burman, 1994, p. 241, in Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017).

Nikunen (2019a) adds that representations of bare suffering frequently go together with images of 'passive victimhood', signs that portray them as victims but not as political agents. Georgiou (2018) similarly states that digital media representations of refugees lack messages concerning their political stances – rather, they seem ever grateful of Western assistance. For instance, Georgiou (2018) finds that, particularly in the European context, refugees in host countries do not "speak politics of anger, especially politics that target Europe's inadequacies in dealing with migration" (p. 52). In a broader sense, FDPs neither seem to speak of their anger towards a history of Western colonialism and foreign armed interventions, which have likely contributed to the state of dependency and instability that their origin countries are in (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019). Thus, apart from glossing over the political causes of, and solutions to, displacement crises, this regime of representation also marginalizes FDPs as political beings with their own voice. Within humanitarian narratives,

their voices are portrayed only as in demand of sympathy and care, leaving refugees' rights to be subjected to humanitarian aid, rather than to the obtainment of political and legal rights (Brun, 2016; Georgiou, 2018).

2.3.3 Regime of threat

Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) further make note of a regime used in mainstream media they term "visibility as threat" (p. 1169). Johnson (2011) states that more generally, alongside the shift from a Eurocentric image of the refugee to one of the global South, came increasingly racialized representations; strengthening distinctions between 'us' and 'them'; and 'here' and 'there'. Unlike the regime of empathy and pity; the visualities of threat mainly consist of aggressive men, with darker skin tones, rioting and causing disturbances to 'our' social order (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Nikunen, 2019a). These narratives have been found to be largely adopted by news media to serve a crisis mentality, in which refugees and migrants are framed in terms of economic opportunism, and as potential national, economic and social threats (Beck, 2017; Gray & Franck, 2019; Wilmott, 2017). These one-sided, racialized media representations of refugees and migrants may produce further practices of othering (Gray & Franck, 2019). Disregarding migrants' common humanity to emphasize their otherness further fails to recognize the plurality of their identities, while contributing to the silencing and marginalization of their voices (Franquet Dos Santos Silva, Brurås & Beriain Bañares, 2018).

Despite that it may appear antithetical for humanitarian NGOs to mobilize support and aid through a discourse of fear and threat, some scholars identify such discursive regimes when scrutinizing NGOs communication practices. For instance, Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2017) identify securitization as the dominant paradigm of Western states and institutions, defined as a performance of power whereby a political community is called to treat a particular issue or group as an existential threat and therefore to approve of urgent measures to deal with that threat. Securitization is a complex practice since it "relies on the performative capacity of communication to produce and circulate differential meanings about different populations" (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017, p. 161). Humanitarian organizations have often sought to relate refugee protection to issues concerning security – in the interest of Western states (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). Ongenaert and Joye (2019) refer to this strategy as cross-issue persuasion, a strategy that aims to frame displacement as a politically relevant, urgent problem, by connecting it to issues of national security.

In the name of geopolitical protection of borders, various digital technologies, AI and big data practices are increasingly utilized by aid agencies to surveil mobility at the borders, gather biometric data and outsource this information to global security centers and private vendors (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Madianou, 2019b). The infrastructure of the border dehumanizes FDPs, narrating them as "biometric assemblages" (p. 582); digitally traceable bodies (Madianou, 2019b). Such narratives risk strengthening the "hierarchies resulting from bias, ethical concerns, data sharing and breaches as part of a larger turn towards experimenting new technologies on vulnerable populations who cannot opt-out" (Leurs et al, 2020, p. 10). Simultaneously, the symbolic border, as previously described, is strengthened in the communicative architecture of institutions (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). Particular categories of mobile populations are highly visible in this representation design, compelling us to view the issue of forced displacement as a threat to our security, while their own embodied identities and narratives remain invisible (Madianou, 2019b).

2.3.4 Regime of self-reflexivity

The previously discussed regimes of representation were largely victim-oriented, however several scholars (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2017; Richey, 2018) make note of another, rather recent tendency in humanitarian communication: the use of creative and mediatized campaigns, in which attention is instead centered around the Western donor. The regime of self-reflexivity moves away from a relationship of common humanity, and instead relies on ". . . the contingent 'Western self' as moral justification for solidarity with displaced people" (Ongenaert, 2019, p. 483). The new morality of humanitarianism is produced by removing the perceived ambivalence of displaced people; by presenting them in creative manners, and synchronously "responding to the self-reflection and -cultivation of Western audiences" (Ongenaert, 2019, p. 483). Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) argue these narratives mainly make use of two strategies: a) celebrity advocacy, and b) creative social media visuals.

The former involves the popular images of celebrities, making humanitarian trips to visit, help, or bring attention to refugees and their circumstances. In some instances, celebrities even become important faces of organizations – such as Angelina Jolie, who is UNHCR Special Envoy. Celebrity philanthropists, because of their capital, have the symbolic power to raise awareness to certain issues, as well as ability to become the proxy between the spectators and the sufferers (Richey & Brockington, 2020). The celebrity, whom the audience trusts and resonates with, becomes "a medium of self-recognition, wherein aspirational

discourse gravitates around the interiority of her emotion and, consequently, around those who reflexively mirror themselves in her" (Chouliaraki, 2012b, p. 16). Richey and Brockington (2020) argue celebrity humanitarianism puts the actual humanitarian issue in the background, whereas the celebrities' voice is mainly in the spotlight. The notion of Western celebrities becoming the spokespersons of, and for the sufferers elsewhere – who 'cannot' speak for their own misfortune – further perpetuates an idea that refugees are speechless victims who need to be 'saved' by our 'heroes' (Chouliaraki, 2012b; Richey & Brockington, 2020).

The latter – innovative, intriguing visual graphics – makes use of irony, "a textual trope characterized by a high degree of self-consciousness" (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 118). These textual tropes work to trigger a *self-reflexivity* in the Western audience, and urges them reflect on the extremities and unfairness of global issues (Chouliaraki, 2017). For instance, surrounding the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, many cartoons were distributed that made use of irony: such as one that illustrated the dead body washed ashore, with next to him a refused asylum application, accompanied with the Twitter message 'shame on you Europe, shame on us'. Self-reflexivity is further appealed using statements such as "with your donation you can save a child", that make the spectator co-present in humanitarian campaigns, while highlighting the spectator as a potential hero, who can save children singlehandedly (Chouliaraki, 2012b).

Two factors Chouliaraki (in Musaro, 2017) argues highly contributed to "the rise of ironic sensibilities" (p. 283), are neoliberal sensibilities; and the mediatization of humanitarianism. Neoliberalism transforms all aspects of social life to market value (Mavelli, 2018); a space where an individual's voice has no value (Couldry, 2010). Chouliaraki in Musaro (2017) states that in "articulating the moral messages of solidarity" (p.283), humanitarian agencies frequently rely for example on market-driven strategies like branding or celebrity advocacy, rather than addressing fundamental humanitarian challenges. Refugees thus risk being reduced to market commodities; their struggles and the causes thereof left silenced (Mavelli, 2018).

Mediatization of humanitarianism refers to the important role of digital media in expressing the call for solidarity (Richey, 2018). Digital media allow for innovative ways of engaging in campaigns at a distance (Richey, 2018). Social media campaigns are perhaps most appealing because of the assumption that these new media facilitate involvement of the public—by simply 'clicking' to donate for a cause, users may feel like they are actively contributing to the cause (Madianou, 2013). However, various scholars (e.g. Chouliaraki,

2017; Richey, 2018) are critical of individualized, mediatized humanitarian campaigns, as "the mediatization of experiences of the ethical self who must continue to follow, engage, and comment on the lives in the campaign and the Southern recipient reinforces an individualization of humanitarianism, not an expansion of its representations or the scope of global caring" (Richey, 2018, p. 636). Whereas refugees may remain highly visible in these campaigns, their representations are accompanied by great invisibility, as their voices become seemingly irrelevant in the call for solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2010; Richey, 2018).

2.4 Refugees as actors? Shift towards the promotion of self-reliance

Whereas the aforementioned regimes of representation were mainly criticized for ultimately presenting displaced people as sufferers, subject of Western contemplation, as well as for depriving them of their voice and agency; a regime that highlights refugees' self-reliance serves as a counter response to the image of refugees as helpless, dependent sufferers (Chouliaraki, 2010; Krause & Schmidt, 2019; Ongenaert, 2019). The positive narrative can thus be seen as a counter narrative: it aims to highlight refugees' agency, resilience and self-reliance. This shift towards a 'positive' representation of refugees is simultaneously reflected in the Global Compact for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018b). Following the Global Compact, several aid organizations have made raising refugees' resilience and self-reliance integral components in the construction of their organizational policies and practices (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Krause & Schmidt, 2019). UNHCR, for instance, has taken up great responsibility in the practice of "helping FDPs to help themselves" (Krause & Schmidt, 2019). Self-reliance here is roughly defined as:

> "the ability of individuals, households or communities to meet their essential needs and enjoy their human rights in a sustainable manner and to live with dignity. Self-reliant persons of concern lead independent and productive lives and are better able to enjoy their rights, while also contributing to their host societies" (UNHCR, 2017, p. 3).

Going through the traumatic experience of forced displacement can have significant aversive effects on one's psychological and physical wellbeing (James, Iyer & Webb, 2019). The strategy of promoting FDPs self-sufficiency, aims to help them to gain back their strength after enduring hardships, while also empowering them to be resourceful actors (UNHCR, 2018b). Aid organizations primarily aim to improve FDPs' economic self-reliance,

by providing them with the skills and resources to eventually become independent from humanitarian aid (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018).

Several scholars have raised their concerns about the implementation of a self-reliance discourse by aid organizations (e.g. Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Krause & Schmidt, 2019; Wright, 2018). Representations of refugees as actors include imagery of them as entrepreneurs, (self-)employed, and seemingly easily recovered from their setbacks (Bracke, 2016). Like the formerly discussed regime of self-reflexivity, this strategy is argued to be highly embedded in neoliberal logics (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Leurs et al., 2020). In one sense, images of refugees as resilient entrepreneurs respond to Western ideals of what constitutes an 'acceptable' migrant (Nikunen, 2019b). 'Acceptable' in this context refers to the embodiment of independence and individualism, two key principles lying at the heart of neoliberalism (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018).

Another essence of neoliberalism, identified in a self-reliance regime, is the reliance on logics of the market. More specifically, one is primarily seen as a good, functioning citizen, when he/she is able to participate in the labor market (Couldry, 2010; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). In the context of refugees this has meant that "the political economy of the migration industry also increasingly revolves around commodifying migrant connectivity and migrant labour . . . demanding a particular performed *refugeeness* which includes, for example, successful integration through refugee participation in hackathons and computer code schools" (Leurs et al., 2020, p.11; Udwan, Leurs & Alencar, 2020). This may mean that only the migrants who 'fit in' the standard of Western societies receive a chance for voice, while others, who for any reason do not comply with the market ideals, remain silenced (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018).

Notwithstanding, a renewed focus on refugees' agency may encourage new, promising forms of visibility of refugees in digital communication. Madianou et al (2015) suggest digital media pose as opportunities for voice, seeing its ability for participation of those people who are otherwise marginalized. While most studies have focused on mainstream media representations, and representation in traditional humanitarian communication (e.g. pamphlets, TV commercials and legal documents); this study will instead examine digital media representations, seeing its ability to voice refugees and to distribute renewed versions of representations is relatively unknown (Ongenaert, 2019). For the framework to be comprehensive, the present study will include all regimes discussed to examine how refugees are represented in digital humanitarian communication.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to answer the research question regarding how refugees are represented in refugee aid organizations' online communication, a qualitative content analysis was performed to collect 42 stories and blogs published on three institutions' websites. A thematic analysis was used to scrutinize textual components in the stories. Additionally, a semiotic analysis was applied to analyze the images present in the selected stories. This section aims to account for the chosen methodological approach, as well as to explain how data was collected and analyzed. Finally, some limitations of the design will be discussed.

3.1 Units of analysis

Ever since 2015 – a year that marked a record high in numbers of forcibly displaced people seeking refuge in the Global North – several Western nations have strengthened their efforts to restrict and refuse hosting FDPs, violating the basic commitment to refugees under international law (Lehne, 2016). The Global Compact on Refugees was adopted in December of 2018 by NGOs, IGOs and states, in an effort to reform international refugee policy (UNHCR, 2018b). To put it simply, the Compact serves to enhance international solidarity in the response to refugee situations (UNHCR, 2018b). In particular, the objectives are to: "(i) ease pressures on host countries; (ii) enhance refugee self-reliance; (iii) expand access to third country solutions; and (iv) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity" (UNHCR, 2018b, p. 2).

Taking up Ongenaert's (2019) notion that communication serves as a foundation and signifier of organizational visions and practices—humanitarian institutions' commitment to improve conditions, both for refugees and host countries, is likely to be reflected in their public communication. It is therefore particularly interesting to study the communication published after the introduction of the Global Compact, seeing as this might have had an effect on the way that refugees are presented in contemporary humanitarian discourse (Ongenaert, 2019).

Three international refugee aid organizations have been selected for the present study: UNHCR, Mercy Corps and International Organization for Migration (IOM). UNHCR, an IGO, is a crucial aid organization—for being the most prominent spokesperson of FDP related issues; and for their significance in setting the tone for global and regional refugee policies, as well as for other refugee aid agencies (Krause & Schmidt, 2016). Mercy Corps

was then selected, a large humanitarian NGO with great reach – known to operate in over 40 countries worldwide (Mercy Corps, n.d.). Although Mercy Corps does not exclusively assist FDPs, they are greatly involved with helping those individuals and communities affected by forced displacement. The third organization to be analyzed is the IOM, an IGO, which is largely involved in providing services for migrants, including forcibly displaced migrants (IOM, n.d.). As UN agencies, UNHCR and IOM play an important and influential role in terms of the governance of international migration and the protection of refugees. Besides having a dominant presence in the world stage, all three organizations have an important digital presence. While it is difficult to obtain official numbers on their daily website traffic – their large presence on various social media[1]; as well as their prominence within Google search results[2]; can serve as an indication of their prominence in the digital arena.

Most NGO and IGO websites contain a section with stories and blogs, produced by the organizations themselves. These articles serve as relevant data for the present study, as they aim to tell their audience about stories of individuals, communities and/or organizational operations. Additionally, they provide perspective on these organizations in terms of governance and their influence on public opinion about migration and forced displacement globally. Website stories/blogs thus offer great insight into the narratives and descriptions used by organizations (Ongenaert, 2019), particularly with regard to the commitments stated in the Global Compact of Migration.

A total of 42 articles published on three organizations' websites were collected using qualitative content analysis. Hashemnezhad (2015) notes qualitative content analysis is a highly appropriate method to study the manifest and latent content of textual elements, which corresponds to purpose of this research. Qualitative content analysis combines purposively and randomly selected texts to find a suitable data set for answering the research question (Hashemnezhad, 2015). In this research, the articles were first purposefully sampled based on their topic, size and time frame. With regard to the former criterion, only articles pertaining to forced displacement are selected, as opposed to articles about other humanitarian matters. The size of the article was selected in accordance with the guidelines for thesis research, which stated the minimum word count to be 300 (Janssen & Verboord, 2019). Selected articles ranged from approximately 800 to 1600 words.

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[1] As of 8 June 2020: UNHCR has 2.4M Twitter followers (https://twitter.com/refugees); IOM has 135.4K (https://twitter.com/UNmigration); and Mercy Corps 225.4K (https://twitter.com/mercycorps).
[2] The three organizations are visible in the top results, in a Google search of 'refugee aid organization'. A top place in the search results is one of the most effective ways to increase website traffic (Yalçın & Köse, 2010).

For the sake of this study, the time frame from which the 42 articles were selected was narrowed down to 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019. The starting date marks the beginning of the year following the adoption of the Global Compact of Migration. The end date roughly marks the date before the COVID-19 outbreak took its toll worldwide, and demanded organizations to come up with a crisis response (UN, 2020). There is thus some reason to assume that the general representation strategy changed in response to the 2020 crisis—and while this assumption may be an interesting point of investigation, it lies beyond the scope of this study.

After the articles were purposefully sampled based on the described criteria, random sampling was used to select 16 from UNHCR, 14 from IOM, and 12 from Mercy Corps.

3.2 Methodological approach

The content of the articles found on the organizations' websites has multiple layers, as they contain both textual and visual elements. Visual components – in the case that they were present – were not compared to textual components, but rather treated as supplementary elements within a text. The justification for this decision will be covered later in this chapter.

First and foremost, representation at the discursive level was analyzed by means of thematic analysis. Representation at the visual level was studied using a semiotic analysis. The following sections contain an in-depth description of the research design, as well as a description of how both analytical methods were applied in this study to examine the data.

3.2.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a highly suitable to study representation regimes in a text, seeing as it "focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to examine the data intensely and with flexibility, with the purpose of "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes)" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Large amounts of data are thoroughly examined with help of a 'systematic classification process of coding', ultimately resulting in an efficient amount of categories representing similar meanings in the data set (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method allows exploration of not only explicit messages in the data, but also on the latent level, meaning the underlying ideas, concepts and ideologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An analysis at the latent level is highly relevant when studying the articles written by refugee organizations, as aspects

such as underlying conceptualizations, social subjectivities and ideologies have shown to have a great role in the manner that forced displacement is understood and publicly communicated (Krause & Schmidt, 2019; Ongenaert, 2019).

All data was analyzed with help of qualitative data analysis software NVivo, a convenient program for reducing the data through the process of coding. The approach of analysis taken in the present study follows a deductive 'lite' design, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), otherwise described as an inductive design with sensitizing concepts (Boeije, 2010; Bowen, 2006). An inductive design with sensitizing concepts is favoured, as the aim was not to test preconceived hypotheses, but to understand, discover and interpret themes in the content (Bowen, 2006). The advantage of a analytical model with sensitizing concepts is the potential to add new insights and findings to existing research; to be more transparent about theoretical assumptions; and to give focus to the analysis through a conceptual framework (Bowen, 2006). The latter is described by Boeije (2010) as 'theoretical sensitivity', by which he states that data is viewed through a particular theoretical lens, which is also crucial when naming the categories. The sensitizing concepts derived from the literature review, used to assign and order the codes, are displayed in Table 1. Whereas the sensitizing concepts were used as a guideline in the throughout all stages of the coding process, they particularly helped with ordering the categories in a stage called axial coding, as will be explain shortly.

The analysis followed a coding process as suggested by Boeije (2010). Boeije (2010) in his work explains 'the spiral of analysis' (p. 90). Principal in this method is the idea of constant comparison, whereby data gathering and data analysis are constantly alternated between (Boeije, 2010). The steps of the spiral of analysis are, respectively: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In the first stage, *open coding*, a large data set gets segmented, categorized and reassembled (Boeije, 2010). Relevant fragments get assigned a 'code'. In the process of open coding, the sensitizing concepts were not important yet, as every relevant fragment was treated with an open mind. Codes then helped to select and organize relevant data, which then get "put back together in new ways . . . by making connections between categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 2007, in Boeije, 2010), in a process called *axial coding*. Here, the categories were logically distributed keeping some of the sensitizing concepts in mind, yet not being constrained by them and looking out for new possible categories. Finally, during *selective coding*, connections between the categories are looked for and linked to the theoretical framework (Boeije, 2010). The categories that derive

from the selective coding phase, will be the themes used when discussing the findings of the study (Boeije, 2010).

Table 1: Sensitizing concepts

Regime of representation	Examples of indicators
Visibility as mass/biological life	Descriptions of numbers, statistics and references to crowds[3]
Visibility as victims	References to vulnerability [4]; dependency[5]; gratefulness [6]
Visibility as threat	Descriptions of refugees in relation to territorial borders[7]
Visibility as self-reflexivity	Descriptions of celebrity activism, playful reflexivity[8]
Visibility as self-reliance/resilience	Descriptions of refugees as working citizens; entrepeneurs[9]; independent[10]

3.2.2 Semiotic analysis of visuals

Apart from thematic analysis of the discursive elements of the articles, I integrated a semiotic analysis of photographs accompanying the texts. Visual representations of refugees in the media are highly associated with the paradoxical relationship between hypervisibility and invisibility (Binder & Jaworsky, 2018; Willmott, 2017). It is argued that while refugees are made visible in photographs, their visibility is used as a means to evoke a certain reaction from the public, albeit their empathy, or fear (Georgiou, 2018). Photographs thus carry much symbolism that can generate certain meaning (Curtin, 2017). A method that is greatly suitable to study the manifest and the latent of visuals is semiotic analysis (Curtin, 2017).

The study of visual semiotics, in Roland Barthes' theorization, refers to the study of the *denotative* (explicit/direct meanings) and the *connotative* (implicit/latent meanings) levels of images (van Leeuwen, 2001). Studying an image at the denotative level describes the

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[3] Malkki, 2005
[4] Krause & Schmidt, 2019
[5] Nikunen, 2019b
[6] Nikunen, 2019b
[7] Madianou, 2019
[8] Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017
[9] Bracke, 2016
[10] Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018

literal or obvious meaning of an image, which does not require any in-depth interpretation of the viewer (van Leeuwen, 2001). Analysis at the connotative level refers to the personal, cultural or societal meanings that the viewer attaches to the various denotative signs shown in the image (van Leeuwen, 2001).

Much like its textual counterpart, visuals can 'set the agenda' on forced displacement. When reading a story, any photographs accompanying a text will help the reader visualize and remember the story (Binder & Jaworsky, 2018). Seeing as photographs are generally snapshots of real life moments, and therefore appear as more 'objective' to people; they may work to legitimize certain claims made by the writer in an article (Binder & Jaworsky, 2018). Therefore, there was a decision not to treat visuals as separate elements to the text, but rather as elements that were used by the writers to strengthen the particular argument or narrative they were producing in the article (Johnson, 2011). In this context, it seemed important to view the images within the context of a story, as the images aim to help complete a story. This part of the analysis therefore again called for constant comparison (Boeije, 2010), between the textual and visual elements, and between the denotative and connotative.

There are several angles that a semiotic analysis of humanitarian imagery may take on. In order to give the visual analysis more structure, this study applied a scheme (see Table 2) that helped to analyze the images, mainly using elements from Kedra and Sommier's (2018) study.

Kedra and Sommier (2018) suggested a model that first looks at the *basic denotation*: namely who is shown (the subject) and what symbols it depicts. Then it is relevant to study the *photographic techniques*, including gaze, angle, and distance. Thirdly the *emotional scene* is studied, referring to the emotional expression of the subject(s), as well as the atmosphere of the scene.

These three overarching visual elements were operationalized with help of previous literature. First, studying the subject visible in a photograph is important, as it presents the viewer the main characters of displacement issues, which in its turn may have an effect on how the viewer imagines these issues (Rajaram, 2002). An example is the depiction of a mother and child, which may elicit pity (Johnson, 2011), or in contrast a depiction of middle eastern men, which may elicit fear (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). Symbols can similarly frame displacement, think of barbed wire, which may work as a visual trope to depict the border (Kedra & Sommier, 2018).

Photographic techniques – such as gaze, angle and distance – may help the producer to make a certain argument through a photograph (Kedra & Sommier, 2018). Franquet Dos

Santos Silva et al (2018) note how a subject directly gazing into a camera can translate into asking for help, making for a relationship with the viewer based on accountability; and in contrast that the absence of eye contact broadens the distance between the subject and the viewer. Peterlić (2001) adds camera angle as a tool to study humanitarian photographs. It is argued that a high angle shot displays the subject as inferior/subordinate; whereas a low angle shot produces an opposite effect (Peterlić, 2001). With regard to distance, close up shots are more intimate than shots from far away, the latter creating a feeling of distance and anonymity (Franquet Dos Santos Silva et al., 2018)

Lastly, the emotional scene of a photograph refers to the emotional expression of the subject(s) and the overall atmosphere. Kedra and Sommier (2018) importantly note that the attempt of describing emotions in visual communication is potentially subjective to whoever is studying them. However, studying the emotional scene is highly relevant, as the visuality of sheer emotions may activate a strong emotional response from the viewers (Malkki, 2005). This study therefore considers the emotional *atmosphere* of the photograph; divided into dynamic, static and poetic (Kedra & Sommier, 2018). A *dynamic* atmosphere is often intense, and involves the picture of movement; such as border-crossing or conflict (Dos Santos Silva, 2018). Such depictions may represent the subjects as active agents; but it may also symbolize threat. By contrast, a *static* atmosphere portrays refugees as physically there, but passively engaged with the situation (Kedra & Sommier, 2018). An example of this was a photograph that depicted a family sitting in the pile of remains that was once their home. Lastly, a *poetic* atmosphere in a photograph is defined as metaphorical; making use of a creative symbolism and irony (Chouliaraki, 2010).

In the process of analyzing representation in photographs, findings and common patterns will constantly be compared to the outcomes of the thematic analysis. In the description of the final results, answering the question "*how are refugees represented in aid organizations' communication?*" the findings of the visual analysis will be integrated with the themes and topics found in the textual analysis.

Table 2: Scheme used for semiotic analysis

Denotation	Example of denotation	Example of connotation
Basic denotation: "Subject" and "symbols"	A child behind a fence	The child stands for vulnerability/victimhood[11]. The fence represents borders[12].
Photographic techniques: "Gaze", "angle" and "distance"	Gazing into the camera, high angle shot, close up	The subject is intimately portrayed, as a victim asking for help, from a place of inferiority[13]
Emotional scene: "Emotional expression" and "atmosphere"	Angry faces, actively border-crossing	The subjects may be viewed as a threat to security[14]

3.3 Limitations and credibility of the research

It can be argued that qualitative research, in comparison to quantitative methods, depends to a greater extent on the researcher's perspectives and analytical competencies (Patton, 1999). Concerns with the credibility of qualitative research address issues of reliability and validity (Silverman, 2011).

The *reliability* of a qualitative research – the degree to which a study is reproducible terms of method and outcome – can be enhanced by making transparent both the research process, and the theoretical framework used to interpret the data (Silverman, 2011). When analyzing textual and visual data, Silverman (2011) suggests making notes during the coding process, and to be transparent about the categories or concepts used to analyze each text or image. For this reason, I included the sensitizing concepts used for the thematic analysis, as well as the scheme used for the semiotic analysis in this section (Table 1 and Table 2). Additionally, the coding tree that guided the subsequent results section has been added in Appendix A, whereas sample quotes are provided in Appendix B. In Appendix C, a part of the process of semiotic analysis is presented.

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[11] Chouliaraki & Stolic (2017)
[12] Kedra & Sommier (2018)
[13] Peterlić (2001)
[14] Madianou (2019)

Then, the *validity* of a study refers to the extent to which certain choices made in the research are accurately measuring what they intend to measure (Silverman, 2011). A way to improve the validity of a study is by means of *triangulation* (Silverman, 2011). In the present study, I made use of method triangulation, in which different analytical methods are used to check the accuracy of findings in light of the objective of the study (Patton, 1999).

It is furthermore important for a researcher to reflect on their role in the research process, as well as their personal values, and how these may have intentionally or unintentionally affected the outcome of the study (Silverman, 2011). Naturally, to give an account of social phenomena involves a certain level of interpretation from a researcher (Patton, 1999). It is apparent that the topic of my research – forced displacement – is deeply politically loaded (Bracke, 2016). One's history, social, political and cultural position – these are only a few of the elements that may influence how we view the complexities of forced displacement.

Reflecting on my identity as a Western based researcher, with a non-Western migrant background, I have thought of several possible implications for the process and outcome of this research. First, every researcher is to some extent biased – politically or otherwise – when it comes to the interpretation of already value-laden humanitarian narratives (Patton, 1999; Ongenaert, 2019). To minimize the influence of a personal bias, I have sought to ground the analysis in appropriate and multidisciplinary academic literature. Second, the fact that I am a Western based researcher may play a role in how I categorize and frame representation of refugees, and what meanings I attach to those representations. Although, again, this aspect of the analysis is largely grounded in academic literature, I might evaluate certain representations to be dehumanizing or silencing, whereas a person with a forced migration background may assess those differently. It is therefore important to note that any claims I make regarding refugee representation are grounded in academic research as much as possible, and that the aim is to expand on those existing studies – and not an attempt to voice refugees or any other persons described.

The methodological approaches selected for this research came with some limitations. Flexibility, one of the strengths of thematic analysis, can also form a potential risk for the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The broadness of the data can be overwhelming to the researcher, especially if there are no specific guidelines for analysis. To stay away from a strongly deductive approach, but still to add some necessary structure to the analysis, I therefore decided to use sensitizing concepts, which would help me to categorize the data. Another limitation, in comparison to other studies, is that thematic analysis does not allow for

deep analysis of language use, like e.g. discursive analysis would (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Semiotic analysis of visuals requires much interpretation from the viewer, particularly on the connotative level, which may pose a risk to the validity (van Leeuwen, 2001). Having said that, the triangulation of thematic analysis and semiotic analysis can facilitate a richer, more encompassing analysis of representation strategies in refugee aid agencies' digital communication. The results of the analysis will be presented in the next chapter.

4. RESULTS

In this chapter, the four main themes will be discussed that were identified during the analysis. It was found refugees were most frequently represented as: i) *good citizens*, ii) *an urgent problem*, iii) *vulnerable victims* and iv) *a reflection of us*.

4.1 Good, deserving citizens

A salient theme that was identified in the analysis of the articles, was one that depicted refugees as 'good' and 'deserving' citizens. The refugee as a good citizen is fashioned in terms of their productivity and usefulness; economic self-reliance; as well as their gratefulness. The good citizen narrative corresponds to both organizational goals of promoting refugees' self-reliance, and importantly to Northern donors' values (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). The good citizen narrative adheres to the neoliberal sentiment that refugees are only to be valued when they are hard-working, self-reliant individuals (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Krause & Schmidt, 2019).

Analyzing the stories by the aid organizations, it becomes evident that their stories often speak to Western stigmas and concerns regarding refugees' 'usefulness'. This finding supports Easton-Calabria and Omata's (2018) argument, that refugees' reliance on aid is frequently associated with negative values, such as laziness and decadence. In the article titled "why including refugees makes economic sense" (UNHCR #4), UNHCR new Director of the Africa Bureau describes how he had a "lightbulb moment" when he realized he had always somewhat mistakenly focused on the "vulnerable" and in need of aid, when many actually had great market value and potential to contribute to local economy:

> "We tend to go to a place and look at those who suffer the most, who are in need of our intervention. But we don't look at those who are talented, those who have potential and those who are already doing things."

Here, the Director seems to make a distinction between the refugees that "suffer the most" and are dependent on external aid; and the ones with the potential and competence to participate in labour markets. Later this idea of potentiality and useful contribution is 'proved' to the reader when "groundbreaking reports" by UNHCR and the World Bank reveal that 180.000 refugees in and out of camps in Kenya have contributed to "an economy worth US$56 million a year" (UNHCR #4). The article continues in what seems a persuasive

manner, explaining why the inclusion – as opposed to the exclusion – of refugees will ultimately be economically beneficial to many host communities. This 'independency equals usefulness' narrative is reflected further in various articles by the organizations. UNHCR in particular highlights primarily the success stories of those refugees the organization has helped to become self-reliant. In UNHCR #12, the story of a refugee in the DRC[15] was told, specifically focused on how a farming initiative supported by the UNHCR has helped her, among other refugees, to become independent from external aid. In her own account:

> "This project has allowed us to become independent, she says. We earn some money, which means we can survive without relying on handouts."

Even though this is the personal account of one refugee, financial independence is frequently formulated in the stories using positive descriptions, as a sign and a tool of empowerment and resilience. Supporting refugees to become economically independent is often argued to ultimately benefit hosting countries' economies. In contrast, dependence on aid, or the 'failure' to become self-reliant, has rather negative connotations. Those who have the ability to become independent, do not have to rely on handouts. It is not uncommon in the articles for various actors to describe financial aid as "handouts" – a type of unearned, free help. In neoliberal thought, welfare dependence, or people's dependence on handouts, is generally seen as burdensome for a nation's progress (Ferguson, 2013). The idea of hindering the economy, by not participating enough, is illustrated in the following excerpt. Here, a UNHCR reporter describes that for Syrian refugee, Najwa, the start of her own business has not only allowed her to acquire economic independence,

> "it has also benefited the Jordanian host community by providing employment opportunities for local women, and ensuring that the presence of Najwa and other Syrian refugees like her boosts rather than hinders economic development" (UNHCR #2)

The narrative, that the inclusion of refugees can in fact be beneficial, works as a response to the concerns and fears from potential donors, that the presence of refugees in society may ultimately burden a nation's economy. It could be argued that an understanding of refugees that separates them in terms of actors who are economic 'boosters' ('useful'), and

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[15] Democratic Republic of the Congo

the vulnerable who are economic 'hinderers' ('useless'), favors the use of cost-benefit calculations when it comes to assessing whether refugees should be received and included by other nations. This suggests that humanitarian organizations have at least partially moved on from framing the reception of refugees as a moral responsibility of the international community—and instead have come to promote it as a decision where the (economic) benefits of including refugees should outweigh the costs.

In accord with recent studies, it was found in the present study that the entrepreneurial migrant is often viewed as the embodiment of self-reliance (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Not only is the refugee entrepreneur self-reliant and thus largely independent of aid, he/she embodies certain characteristics that are highly valued within the neoliberal subjectivity (Mavelli, 2018). The entrepreneurial subject represents a heroic agency, resourcefulness, and the maximization of human capital (Mavelli, 2018). Entrepreneurial, talented and high-skilled migrants have long been viewed as more 'desirable' and 'acceptable' migrants; and are therefore more 'deserving' of inclusion in neoliberal states (Mavelli, 2018; Nielsen, Frederiksen & Larsen, 2020). In contrast, low-skilled irregular migrants are typically marked as undeserving and useless, as they do not embody the necessary marketable capital (Nielsen et al., 2020). In the articles, success stories of entrepreneurial subjects were relatively common. These narratives generally speak to what is considered good citizenship: well-ordered and well-integrated people, holding respectable jobs (Nikunen, 2019b). Their orderly, professional demeanor stands in stark contrast with stereotypical notions of refugees as floating, unsettled and potentially dangerous to the state (Nikunen, 2019b). In the visuals, the refugee as entrepreneur is usually portrayed in their work uniform (for example, see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Refugees and locals at a cooking course. From Training refugees and Ethiopians for the job market, by E. Soteras Jalil, 2019, https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2019/10/5db729c84/. Copyright 2019 by E. Soteras Jalil/UNHCR.

The actors are made visible as cooks, factory workers, and in other recognizable uniforms—signifying that they are well-integrated as part of the nation's work force, and that they are productive and useful. Generally, in these stories, photographs are taken of one individual or a few individuals, from relatively close up and from a neutral eye-level position. This technique of photography invites the viewer to see the subject more intimately, and to view them as an equal (Peterlić, 2001). The neutrality of the shot, together with the recognizability of the subjects in it, make for a non-threatening visibility of the refugees pictured (Franquet Dos Santos Silva et al., 2018).

Interestingly, depictions of the entrepreneurs and workers are typically gendered. While women generally are more frequently the subject of an entrepreneurial narrative, men and women are also portrayed in different professions. While women cover all sorts of professions – including soap making, tailoring, and catering – men are typically portrayed as tech-savvy entrepreneurs. This finding may rest upon the fact that highly-skilled labor migrants – like computer programmers and other IT specialists – are often held in high regard by host nations, as they represent the top tier of skilled employees, who are thus more acceptable, and more deserving of citizenship (Akcapar & Simsek, 2018). Because women and children are generally regarded as more 'deserving' forced migrants, due to their status of vulnerability (Johnson, 2011), male migrants may have to 'prove' their deservingness more.

Yet another way that the 'good citizen' narrative is found to speak to donor and host communities, is through the expression of refugees' gratefulness. Similar to the findings of

Georgiou (2018) and Schwöbel-Patel and Ozkaramanli (2017), refugees in the organizations' stories appear ever grateful to Western help, and to their host nations.

Various refugees voice their gratitude, but at times the appraisal would come from organizations' officials as well. In UNHCR #13, High Commissioner Filippo Grandi shared his disbelief for some of the "very worrying" conditions in a refugee camp on Lesvos, Greece. Besides the camp being overcrowded beyond capacity, their shelters were in very poor condition, and basic necessities like hot water, power and medical necessities were scarce. Though Grandi briefly calls on solidarity from European states to support Greece, in much of the remainder of the article, Grandi voices his gratitude towards the country:

> "There needs to be solidarity, there needs to be compassion, there needs to be an understanding that what Greece is doing with incredible generosity and openness needs to be shared more widely, Grandi said. We all need to stand together with Greece."

In this particular article, refugees appear mostly voiceless. The conditions they are living in are inhumane, yet the reader does not learn how the people living there feel towards those conditions. Instead, we hear Grandi's account of the issue, who mainly expresses his appreciation for Greece's approach to the situation. In the discourse of gratefulness, deference and gratitude seem to overshadow any mention of structural questions pertaining to the root causes of issues – be it an overcrowded camp, or more generally, displacement crises. In the humanitarian narratives, problems like inhumane conditions in a refugee camp, thus just seem to 'exist', without particular mention of a structural origin. Subsequently, refugees who have to live through those problems, do not appear as political subjects. Any dissatisfaction voiced by refugees towards Europe's inadequacies to deal with irregular migration flows, or with international interferences in conflicts in their country of origin, could paint the refugee as 'ungrateful' (Schwöbel-Patel & Ozkaramanli, 2017). Their agency is therefore limited to the private sphere, where they are presented as heroic and entrepreneurial.

A consequence of the depoliticization of displacement related issues, coexistent to a neoliberal emphasis on individualism; is that it risks attribution of certain phenomena – such as poverty or dependency – to individual failings, rather than structural (macro) issues (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Whereas self-reliant, entrepreneurial refugees may thus be viewed as a product of their own hard work and persistence – those who cannot attain self-sufficiency, and are dependent, may be thought of as lethargic and idle. This thought may

lead to negative attitudes towards those refugees who 'inevitably' become reliant on aid (Ferguson, 2013).

4.2 An urgent problem

Another common theme that was identified during the analysis, was that of forced displacement as an urgent problem. An urgent problem requires worldwide attention from states, news media and the public; as well as pivotal legal, political and technological solutions (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Madianou, 2019a, 2019b). When refugee aid organizations portray forcibly displaced people as an urgent issue, they oftentimes make use of discourses of biological life; securitization; and symbolic bordering.

Mainstream media and humanitarian communication will often refer to large forced migration movements as "crises". When framing an influx of forced migrants from so-called 'Third-world' countries to European countries, as a refugee crisis, a discourse is created that Europe as a continent – its identity, safety and economy – is under threat (Gray & Franck, 2019). A crisis/threat discourse then legitimizes particular ways of talking about a crisis, as well as certain regulations and measures taken by Western institutions that aim to reduce that threat (Gray & Franck, 2019). However, a crisis/threat narrative was found to unfold in a different manner from a threat narrative as usually found in mainstream media. In mainstream media, a discourse of threat is more 'overt'; in the sense that the message that refugees are dangerous outsiders is often reaffirmed using negative wording such as "swarms" and "floods", as well as by making references to terrorism and religious extremism (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). Digital humanitarian narratives were found to be different in that they would typically deviate from using 'negative' adjectives to describe forced displacement, but instead use seemingly 'objective' information, such as charts and other quantitative data, to convey the risks that forced migrants bear for 'our' stability and security.

One such way the organizations attempt to feed a crisis narrative, is by using numerical categorizations. The three agencies would frequently describe how hundreds of thousands, and even several millions of refugees have fled to other countries in a certain year. Without any reference point being provided to those numbers, the statistics' only purpose seems to be to indicate the gravity of the situation to the reader. Referring to refugees as numbers, rather than as individuals with a story, works to reduce them to biological lives (Brun, 2016; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). What is important to the notion of biological life is not only what *is* described, but also what is *not* described. When processes of forced

displacement are presented as urgent issues, forced migrants become part of a cyclical life process in which they have little power or agency. What often misses is a description of how these processes came to be in the first place; a biographical account of an emergency that exists within a history and a future. For example, as seen in Figure 2, an image without much context was shared in a story by IOM (#9). The story first introduces the fact that "despite the conflict, migrants continue to arrive in Yemen. According to the IOM, nearly 93,400 migrants had entered the country between January and July 2019". The story then goes on to describe how many of these migrants face dangerous situations on their journey and that they "can be subjected to human rights violations - injury, kidnapping, abuse, exploitation and becoming caught up the conflict". In this context, Figure 1 was shared, showing detained migrants in a football stadium in Aden, Yemen.

Figure 2: A photograph of detained migrants in Yemen. *From Safety in a Conflict Zone*, by O. Headen, 2019, https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/safety-conflict-zone-migrant-women-yemen-find-shelter-ioms-foster-families. Copyright 2019 by O. Headen/IOM.

The productions of FDPs as biological mass was found to be particularly amplified in the photograph. The image shows a large group of refugees; however, nobody particularly stands out. It shows people either sitting or standing, taking on a rather passive position. The photograph depicts what Chouliaraki and Stolic name a "mass of unfortunates" (2017, p. 1167); a type of visibility that reduces human lives to suffering bodies, one that undermines their individuality. In this context, humanitarian agencies sustain a hierarchy of voice where refugees are spoken *about*, rather than spoken *with*. By not highlighting any individuals in particular, the audience may take on a relationship of distance with the people pictured

(Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). Images that depict refugees as biological lives simply register the fact that there is an emergency going on 'there', while decontextualizing the emergency from its historical and political circumstances. By decontextualizing the situation, FDPs risk being misrecognized as historical and political subjects. Importantly, as Couldry (2010) theorized, refugees need to be able to give an historically embedded account of their story, for their voices to be valued. By viewing refugees simply as newcomers without recognizing their historical trajectories, they are more likely to be understood as a threat (Brun, 2016).

In addition to the collectivization of bodies; humanitarian agencies will often engage in narrations of the border to bring attention to displacement crises. The border is conceptualized and shaped by various actors, practices and discourses (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017). In this context, the border was presented as a place of order, discipline and vigilance. Narratives of and by refugees would reflect a language of 'correct', dutiful citizenship, representing them as obedient and openly repudiating illegality. These narratives directly speak to populist discourse which views refugees as threats, illegitimate and disturbing of the social order. Visually, these narratives may look like Figure 3 and Figure 4. In Figure 3, IOM had photographed the border in eastern Congo, where many people are crossing the border between DRC and Rwanda every day. The story likewise takes place on the territorial border; it describes how large movements between borders form a risk for migrant communities to get infected with and spread Ebola virus (IOM #12). Although this image makes use of a typically 'negative' portrayal of migrants, namely using massification, the story and photographs surrounding it actually frame the open border as a positive and important place. An open border actually helps to screen people for symptoms of Ebola, which helps to curb the spread of the disease. IOM Uganda EVD Health Coordinator states "it is important that people can continue to move, trade and seek refuge freely. As long as borders remain open, people won't cross informally and Ebola won't go undetected" (IOM #12). The people crossing the borders would obediently stand in line to wait for their screenings. Though migration is thus not framed as a negative thing but instead as necessary for survival, it was found that this narrative still did not engage with migrants' identities and voices. Instead, the narrative focused on the benefits of monitoring at the border, to which people crossing the border are necessarily subjected. Images such as Figure 3, in the context of the story, serve to call for a monitoring of bodies, seeing as the hectic movement of people across borders may form a danger for the health and safety of themselves and others.

Figure 3: The border between Rwanda and DRC. From *Curbing an Epidemic on the Move, Stopping Ebola in its Tracks*, by M. Mohammed, 2019, https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/curbing-epidemic-move-stopping-ebola-its-tracks. Copyright 2019 by M. Mohammed/IOM.

Figure 4: A chart visualizing where Venezuelans are fleeing. From *Quick facts: Venezuela humanitarian crisis*, by Mercy Corps, 2019, https://europe.mercycorps.org/en-gb/blog/quick-facts-venezuela-crisis.

Figure 4, which depicts a map focusing on where Venezuelan refugees are fleeing, portrays the movements of people in an arguably more 'distanced' and 'objective' manner. The red arrows leaving from Venezuela represent the routes that are taken by Venezuelan migrants, demarcating the nations where most forced migrants arrive. The map provides a 'birds-eye' view, in which the viewer gazes distantly upon the emergency spreading across territorial borders. Images such as these are believed to create a "monitorial relationship", in which the viewer 'surveils' the migrants depicted (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). This monitorial relationship is simultaneously reflected in the relationship between humanitarian organizations and refugees. An example of this relationship based on power is in the

increased importance of digital technologies and practices in the surveillance and support of refugees. In an emergency discourse, the aid organizations would commonly promote technological solutions, such as biometric registration and the use of big data analytics. Madianou (2019) had proposed several problems with what she names "technocolonialism" – a notion that captures how digital developments within humanitarian operations "reinvigorate and rework colonial relationships of dependency" (p. 10). In this context, the present study found technological solutions to be presented as a panacea for emergencies, without taking into account the risks associated with certain digital practices as presented for example in Madianou's study (2019). Instead, various technological practices – such as the use of drones to help a faster response to emergencies, or biometric registration of refugees residing camps – are presented as empowering for refugees. Besides these practices posing as potential risks to the privacy and equality of refugees (Madianou, 2019) —the present study finds the account of refugees to be largely absent in this narrative.

Another problematic identified during the examination of the articles; is that in the discussion of preferred solutions to displacement emergencies, refugees hardly get to voice their preferences. Instead, international aid organizations often reaffirm repatriation to be the preferred solution, in line what is stated in the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2018b). What this finding suggests goes beyond the inclusion of refugees' voices in digital communication; it risks imposing what is generally preferred as a solution for states (i.e. repatriation), to be *the* preferred solution of refugees as well (Perry & Schwartz, 2019). While, indeed, many forced migrants likely wish to return home, Perry and Schwartz (2019) note a large number of refugees could be afraid of returning home and instead prefer to stay in host countries. However, digital narratives hardly pay attention to the voices of refugees whose preferred solution is not necessarily repatriation. In some cases, it was even noted how refugees have posed to be a problem to host countries' stability by staying there. The 'urgent problem' narrative, when describing the preferred solutions to emergencies, thus takes states' and the larger international audience into greater account, than the expertise, preferences and agency of affected populations.

4.3 Vulnerable victims

It was found that the aid organizations oftentimes represent refugees in terms of vulnerability and victimhood. Organizations intend to give a face to the suffering, and therefore mobilize intimate stories of forcibly displaced individuals or families suffering.

This representation style manifests itself primarily through heightened visibility of women, and particularly the symbolic 'mother and child'. In these narratives, aid organizations often play the role of the 'hero' or the 'savior'. Interestingly, while several scholars theorized both mainstream media and aid agencies to have largely moved on from portraying refugees as victims (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2010, 2012a; Richey, 2018); this 'negative' representation style appeared the most salient during the analysis of the data.

In contrast to the previously discussed regime, in which refugees were often presented as anonymous masses; this style instead intends to voice mostly individuals and families. Refugees notably get most 'speaking time' in a narrative where the focus is on their vulnerability, in comparison to the other narratives. When refugees' voice themselves, it is thus often limited to the voicing of their hardships. Arguably more humanizing than some of the other regimes discussed, a story of suffering would oftentimes engage with refugees' biographical lives. In some occasions, aid organizations would lend their digital platform to the success stories of 'survivors'. Brief biographical accounts would typically follow a particular linear sequence. Survivors would reminisce on a time before their forced displacement, when all was still peaceful and good. Then the survivor would narrate their hardships and suffering experienced during their migration journey, starting from what dangers prompted them to leave, to the precarious conditions faced when crossing the border. Ultimately, the story would mostly end on an optimistic note; arrived in their new destination, the survivor reflects hopefully on their future. The refugee subject appears as human in their stories and through their portrait photographs. To some extent, these survivors speak stories that are familiar to the Western imaginary: as individuals, and for their families, they want a better life, they are hard-working and determined. Yet more commonly, their stories are filled with and directed by their suffering. Their vulnerability and suffering is what sets them apart from the (Western) viewer. Chouliaraki (2010) described how there is a risk that 'too positive' narratives of refugees – similar stories without suffering – may be misrecognized by the donor as a message that everything is already taken care of, thus leading to inaction. From an organizational-centric approach on communication (Ongenaert, 2019), it could therefore be argued that the familiar 'positive' narrative strategically employs descriptions of refugees' suffering elsewhere—reminding the Western donor that while their contribution is helping, their aid is still needed.

In addition to the conditionally humanizing, biographical accounts of the subject's journey; the aid organizations would still employ a traditionally 'negative' regime of representation. A negative regime focuses mainly on women and children, and particularly

emphasizes their state of 'vulnerability'. The notion that humanitarian organizations put emphasis on women and children to construct the 'vulnerable refugee' is not new. In fact, a considerable amount of studies found the mother/child dynamic to be a powerful symbol of "development" discourse, as they culturally and historically represent ultimate innocence, vulnerability and helplessness (e.g. Johnson, 2011; Kapoor, 2004; Malkki, 2005; Rajaram, 2004). Besides increasingly becoming the subject of an entrepreneurial narrative, as discussed earlier; women mostly remained the symbol of refugee suffering in the findings of this study. The aid organizations would produce news-like content in their construction of the suffering women and children; particularly by making use of grand poetic descriptions and aestheticized photojournalism. One example of this is IOM #4, in which impressive stories of individuals in Mozambique are told after cyclone Idai had destroyed much of their houses and farms. This particular article centers around the powerful black and white photographs of destroyed properties, children playing in the remnants, and of the symbolic mother and child. The photographs in Figure 5 and Figure 6 particularly stood out, since these tell a story that is almost paradigmatic of how the "developed" view the "developing" world (Malkki, 2005).

Figure 5, the photograph that introduces the story, shows a child in tears on its mother's back. The child gazes directly into the camera, making eye contact with the viewer. The picture is poetic; using a dramatic black and white filter; as it connotates a cry for help. Figure 6 uses similar photographic effects to create a dramatic impact. The viewer is again reminded of the harsh reality of bare suffering – when they are presented with a photograph of a child on a scale, suspected to be malnourished.

Figure 5. Screenshot from IOM's website. From *Idai Remnants of a Cyclone in Black & White*, by A. Nero, 2019, https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/idai-remnants-cyclone-black-white. Copyright 2019 by A. Nero/IOM.

Figure 6. An underweight child on a scale. From *Idai Remnants of a Cyclone in Black & White*, by A. Nero, 2019, https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/idai-remnants-cyclone-black-white. Copyright 2019 by A. Nero/IOM.

This article, as with several other articles, tells the story of climate-driven forced displacement. Interestingly, it was observed that in a narrative surrounding 'climate refugees', there would be much more attention to the cause of their displacement, than with conflict- or war-driven displacement. There could be several interpretations of this particular finding. A cause of displacement that is climate-driven, is presumingly easier to identify, than displacement that is driven by political, religious or cultural conflicts, which are usually more complex in nature. Another way to explain this finding, is for the reason that climate-driven displacement is generally non-political in nature, perceivingly involving less agency— whereas man-made causes usually are grounded in politics and other social realities. A construction of the refugee as a victim, hardly engages with their political subjectivities. Having the Western donor in mind; humanitarian agencies may thus pay more attention to the root causes of climate-driven forced migration, assuming 'climate refugees' take on a greater position of helplessness and passiveness. However, a further study is suggested, regarding possible differences between the construction of the 'climate refugee' contra other refugees.

The three aid organizations would oftentimes present themselves in the story as the hero or the savior. Several authors have made note of how the victimization of the refugee subject in humanitarian practices reflect an extension of the colonial project (e.g. Madianou et al., 2015; Madianou, 2019; Wright, 2018). The colonial project assumes an innate vulnerability and dependency of affected populations, making them in need of external assistance (Malkki, 2005). It assumes the inability of affected communities to help themselves; and synchronously assumes the expertise of the (Western) humanitarian system on how to deal with disasters and conflict elsewhere. In this narrative, the aid agencies make use of a symbolic bordering, that excludes people in global South as experts of their own

world, and instead portrays them as nothing other than a suffering society, like in the following example:

> "Despite these hardships, Mercy Corps is one of only a few organizations with team members and local partners working on the front lines of Syria, meeting the urgent needs of a suffering society" (MC #5)

In this excerpt, Mercy Corps ascribes itself the role of critical rescuer of the Syrian "suffering society". The generalization used here paints a picture of Syrian society as needy and dependent. Another quote that exemplifies the assumed 'savior' role of international organizations, is presented in MC#9, when referring to the DRC crisis:

> "Weak governance, a lack of infrastructure and stunted economy, coupled with two decades of conflict, have led to one of the most ignored and forgotten crises in the world. That's why we're there to help."

The statement is written from a Western world's perspective, yet it is presented as a universally true statement. This finding is common, yet relevant, since it reflects that the humanitarian narrative assumes the Western view as central and ultimately ruling. The crisis in the DRC is deemed the most ignored and forgotten crisis in the world, yet this statement would most likely not hold truth for the population of the DRC and neighboring countries. Additionally, it presents us with the notion that since the DRC is dealing with failings and conflict; it becomes the duty of the Western humanitarian agency to provide assistance.

A couple issues are presented when the refugee subject is constructed through vulnerability and incompetence. Criticisms date back to discussions by Spivak (1988) on whether the 'subaltern' can speak, and similar to arguments presented by Couldry (2010); she concluded they do not 'have a voice' in the sense that voice is effectively heard and listened to, since their word and expertise is considered inferior in a domain of hierarchy. The present study argues that despite repeated attempts to focus on refugees' biographical lives; their voices remain mostly bounded to the conditions in which they would be considered worthy of 'listening to' in the first place. The fact that the message of refugees as vulnerable victims remains so widespread in organizations' digital narratives, while increasingly aspiring to promote refugees as self-reliant agents; make for a dichotomized understanding of refugees. As Krause & Schmidt relevantly noted, the consequence is that "vulnerability, as well as self-

reliance and resilience, appear as a distinct, separable construct or state of mind—refugees are ideally no longer vulnerable due to humanitarian support they have received to reach their self-reliance" (2019, p. 8). This perpetuates an idea that refugees are in need of Western support when it comes to their suffering and vulnerability; but also to reach self-reliance and independence.

4.4 Reflection of us

Another theme that was detected during the analysis was that of refugees as a reflection of us (the spectators). This representation style portrays displaced people in such a way that prompts our self-reflexivity. Rather than being victim-centered, this regime centers primarily around the (Northern) spectator. Despite occasionally voicing refugees; their visuality is produced through creative marketing-like tactics. Much like the "regime of irony" as conceptualized by Chouliaraki (2010, 2012a), this style of representation makes use of celebrity advocacy; irony and reflexivity; as well as promotion of quick-fix solutions. While the self-reflexivity trope was detected on fewer occasions during the analysis than the other three themes discussed, it remains a relevant and subtle way that refugees' voices are silenced.

The promotion of celebrity activism is used by aid organizations to bring more attention to the cause, as well as trigger our self-reflexivity. UNHCR in particular has given several celebrity figures important positions in their organization, with the prime example being Angelina Jolie, who carries the title of Special Envoy. In two particular stories by UNHCR (#1 and #5), Jolie visits Rohingya refugees in a refugee camp in Bangladesh (#1), and in the other occasion Venezuelan refugees in Colombia (#5). These two articles differ from most of the other articles, in that these focus primarily on Jolie's words, emotions and activities, rather than that of refugees or aid workers. In article UNHCR #1, Jolie is focal point of the story, just like its title suggests: "Angelina Jolie urges end to injustices that have driven nearly one million Rohingya into exile in Bangladesh". The story follows her weeklong mission trip, where she speaks with several Rohingya women and children. Although some quotes of the people she had talked to have been included, most of the article lends itself to Jolie's voice. The other article, titled: "Angelina Jolie calls for leadership and humanity as millions flee Venezuela", follows a similar logic. These headlines confirm prior discussed notions that celebrities have become to some extent the voices of the displaced, and in a larger sense of humanity itself (Chouliaraki, 2012b; Richey & Brockington, 2020).

Surely, Rohingyas want injustices to end more than anyone else; but the power of Jolie's call for humanity is that it resonates much greater with the Western spectator (Chouliaraki, 2012b), who views Jolie as the main carrier of emotions, more so than refugees themselves. Celebrities guide our emotional response to suffering, as they become our way of mediating between distance and proximity in the context of refugee suffering. This notion is exemplified in UNHCR#1:

> "Addressing Rohingya refugees in the camp, Special Envoy Jolie said, I want to say I am humbled and proud to stand with you today. You have every right to live in security, to be free to practice your religion and to coexist with people of other faiths and ethnicities. You have every right not to be stateless, and the way you have been treated shames us all."

Jolie speaks to Rohingyas for the spectator, or in a greater sense for the Western world, when she addressed they have the right to be treated like humans. She reflects on our guilt and shame felt when observing what terrible suffering some communities go through. In these stories, refugees become a mere proxy in the exchange between the celebrity and the viewer. The survivors' voices, experiences and feelings are put in the background, while the spectator primarily empathizes with Jolie's authentic emotions. The use of photojournalism in this regime of visibility is particularly telling, seeing that Jolie is the protagonist in photographs; whereas refugees pose more as side characters, or are not even present. Figure 7 shows an example that was found to be quite typical: Jolie stands out as the focal point, the women circle around her and are mostly invisible. These photographs further add to the "spectacle of suffering" (Chouliaraki, 2017), where the celebrities make eye-catching cameos to attract attention from an audience.

Figure 7: Jolie with Rohingya women. From *Angelina Jolie urges end to injustices that have driven nearly one million Rohingya into exile in Bangladesh*, by S. Escobar-Jaramillo, 2019, https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2019/2/5c5c0be54/. Copyright 2019 by S. Escobar-Jaramillo/UNHCR

A couple of issues are presented when celebrity philanthropists like Jolie appear to receive more attention than the actual issue they are advocating for. Refugees are often no more than a proxy in these stories, their voices are largely silenced. It perpetuates an idea that refugees are only worthy of our contemplation, when the celebrity decides so. The audience gives more value to Jolie urging to end injustices, and Jolie's calls for humanity—more than when the survivors or local leaders do this. It could furthermore be argued that when (Western) celebrities become the expert of problems in the global South, the idea is sustained that communities in these nations are dependent on Western powers to "save" them. Celebrities' philanthropic work in countries far away from the West adds to the Othering of postcolonial societies, as it perpetuates an idea that these communities are ever suffering, and never flourishing. It reflects, as Chouliaraki well puts, "historical relationships of power between Western missionaries and indigenous locals . . . now as much as then, unable to represent themselves but subject to the civilizing project of the former" (2012, p. 4). As part of the civilizing project, it is believed refugees and local leaderships lack the agency and expertise to reach prosperity as we know it in the West, reproducing the stereotype that they are dependent on benevolence of the "developed world".

Other than celebrity humanitarianism, forms of communication that put the spectator in the foreground often make use of irony; either reminding the viewer refugees are just like us, or calling us out to reflect on the absurdity of suffering contrasted to 'our' privileged position. Following a neoliberal logic, the call for solidarity is directed at generating

individualized understandings of injustices. An example of this is identified in Mercy Corps' (#3) article; in which Senior Officer of an initiative called *WISE girls*, describes what she has taught from adolescent girls who have helped to design their own reproductive health sessions. Interestingly, this article gives one of the few examples where an aid organization works with a human-centered design, where girls in a refugee camp get to engage and lead the discussions that affect them. The Senior Officer reflects on how working at *WISE girls* has grounded her:

> "I've been reflecting a lot lately on how society perceives girls before and after they reach puberty and also how we, as women, perceive ourselves. The pressures of living up to society's expectations are real and strong . . . [t]his can manifest itself as a lack of confidence and shame, especially when it comes to our bodies . . . I not only recognize this in myself, but I also see it in the girls. I can relate fully to the girl who told me, 'When we are young we wear what we like and play, but when we get older we dress differently and do not go out.' Women need solidarity with other women, and spaces where they can reclaim their agency and break down power dynamics." (MC #3)

In this article, a shared womanhood is what brings the writer, the female reader and the girls closer together. A message is spread that many women worldwide can find themselves in, namely our struggle of living up to patriarchal societal standards. Yet, the message pays little attention to intersectionality—namely what it may mean to be a woman and a refugee; or a woman and a Muslim. In reality, it is often these intersectional identities that differentiate women in terms of social status. While the message, that women need solidarity with each other, as well as spaces where agency can be claimed, is fundamentally important; it disregards some of the other realities that may hinder some female (or non-binary) voices to be heard.

Lastly, the individualization of the call to solidarity may lead to the simplification of issues or to the idea that there are quick-fix solutions to displacement crises. While this message is generally found to be more subtle in the organizations' articles, the general depoliticization of displacement narratives can be attributed to the growing (global) dependence on neoliberal logics. Following a neoliberal logic, structural causes of displacement are generally overlooked or simplified, whereas dispositional (individual) causes and behaviors are emphasized. This may translate into commercialization of messages that stress small individual contributions, like in UNHCR #2, where it is described how a

small donation of 28 US dollars has helped a Syrian refugee "overcome personal tragedy and regain control of her life". While donations are certainly important for these aid organizations to fulfill their duties; overly, and perhaps misleadingly, attributing small individual behaviors as solutions to "Third world" suffering, may perpetuate the idea that displacement crises are less structural and political issues than they are personal ones. This may further work to construct refugees as dependent people in need of our aid; as it may be understood that refugees are more in control over structural causes than they are, and that they must therefore lack the agency and expertise to deal with hardships on their own, since they continue to suffer.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Answer to the research question

The purpose of this study has been to answer to the following research question: *How are refugees represented in international refugee organizations' digital communication?* To answer this question, a thematic analysis and semiotic visual analysis were used to analyze 42 stories/blogs published in 2019 on three refugee aid organizations' websites: UNHCR, IOM and Mercy Corps. Four major themes were identified during the analysis, more specifically, refugees were most often presented as: i) good deserving citizens; ii) an urgent problem; iii) vulnerable victims; and iv) reflections of us.

To ground the study of refugee representation within a relevant framework, I chose focus on the inclusion of *voice* in aid organizations' digital narratives, particularly regarding how refugee voice was facilitated or hindered through various regimes of (in)visibility. The present study suggests that refugee visibility in the organizations' stories remains to accompany great *silence*, despite various intentions to voice refugees and highlight their agency. The findings suggested no particular difference that would be inherent to the digital nature of the stories.

The first theme discussed was that of refugees as *good deserving citizens*. The refugee is seen as a good and deserving citizen when he/she is hard-working, self-reliant and grateful. The good citizen narrative follows a neoliberal logic in that refugees are only seen as 'useful' and valuable citizens when they are suitable participants in the market. This regime of visibility presents the risk of excluding and stigmatizing refugees who are not (yet) able to become self-reliant. A second salient theme was one that depicted displacement as *an urgent problem*. Aid organizations primarily mobilize a problem/emergency narrative to justify particular organizational actions and solutions. Refugees are portrayed as moving biological masses, who have to appear as dutiful, obedient citizens in order to escape the discourse of threat. This regime silences refugees' voices; both as individuals with an embodied account, and as partners in the interventions that will affect them most. Thirdly, and the most salient theme from the data, was that of refugees as *vulnerable victims*. Vulnerability was found to be highly gendered; which perpetuates the idea that women are weaker and in need of saving. It was found that while this narrative engaged at times with refugees' biographical lives, it primarily disregarded refugees' agency, expertise, and political subjectivity. The idea of refugees as victims reflects a continuation of the colonial project, which mobilized the notion

that affected communities are unable to fend for themselves and are thus in need of aid. Lastly, refugees were sometimes made (in)visible as subjects to prompt our *self-reflexivity*. It was discussed how this narrative primarily combines neoliberal and colonial reasonings; where the former translated into individual understandings of displacement, as well as commodification of the celebrity; and the latter to the Western viewer's role as 'savior'. Ultimately, the refugee was dehumanized as a tool to prompt the spectator's self-reflexivity.

It is relevant to note none of the four regimes identified in this study were necessarily mutually exclusive; instead, as theorized earlier, refugee aid agencies would frequently use dichotomized portrayals in the construction of the refugee. In the present study the most common binary construction was that of refugees as self-reliant versus refugees as vulnerable. The two categories appear as distinct oppositions to each other, suggesting that vulnerable refugees are dependent on aid to become self-reliant, and once that stage is reached, the refugee is independent. However, as Krause & Schmidt (2019) had importantly argued, it disregards the potential of refugees to be self-reliant *and* vulnerable at the same time. What is thus generally missing in humanitarian narratives, is a multidimensional understanding of refugeeness.

5.2 Limitations

Regardless of how systematic and comprehensive a scientific study is, it is not free of its limitations. In terms of the theoretical approach of the study, a broader framework was applied that focused on voice, silence, visibility and invisibility of refugees within digital articles by international refugee organizations. Given that the relationship between aid organizations, refugees and representation is extremely complex, I decided to place refugee representation within a historical, political and societal context. A multidimensional focus may have compromised to some degree the depth of the discussion. While the present study provided a comprehensive account of various regimes of visibility; this same factor may have limited some finer insights into, for example, the influence of neoliberal logics on refugee representation.

A research on voice and refugee representation would have benefited from additional data yielded from interviewing humanitarian professionals as well as from refugees themselves. Humanitarian professionals may provide further information regarding organizational decisions and processes in the context of communication as well as challenges in meeting interests of donors, states and refugees (Ongenaert, 2019). Insights into refugees'

perceptions of their own representations would have similarly provided a richer insight into the context in which these representations take place, particularly with regard to their perceived ability to voice themselves and to be heard. However, the scope of this thesis is restricted in terms of time and methodology, which unfortunately obstructed the inclusion of in-depth interviews. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the use of method triangulation in this research offered a valuable and comprehensive insight into contemporary digital representations by aid organizations.

5.3 Implications and suggestions for future research

Representations of refugees by international aid organizations play a crucial role in shaping and reproducing our perceptions and understandings of the refugee subject (e.g. Appadurai, 2019; Bleiker et al., 2014; Hall, 1997; Johnson, 2011). Drawing on a Foucauldian perspective, it is conceptualized that our knowledge of displacement and refugees bears implications for how the public supports certain real life practices, laws, policies and solutions that affect the forcibly displaced. Particularly in the context of proposed changes in the international refugee protection regime, marked by adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees, it remains crucial to examine how and whether these changes have affected the way refugees are presented in humanitarian communication.

As noted earlier, despite intentions by organizations to voice refugees and to emphasize their agency, contemporary representations frequently perpetuate one-dimensional understandings of refugees. It is suggested that refugees' voices are silenced in the same architecture that upholds asymmetrical relations between North-South. The results of this research raise the question whether extensive, humanizing and dignifying representations of refugees are attainable within the current humanitarian ideology, which premise I argue is to civilize the "uncivilized", from a position of authority and saviorism. Future research on refugee representation thus needs to consider the integral principles on which humanitarianism in founded, which I argue may uphold invisibility and silence of the beneficiaries it aims to help.

This study opens some opportunities for further research. First, this research found gender differences in the construction of the *good deserving citizen*. A further study could assess if and why gender is an important element in the discourse of refugees' self-reliance. Another possible fruitful area for further research, is presented in the finding that stories of 'climate refugees' involve a different logic than stories involving e.g. conflict refugees.

Future research may explore whether the cause of displacement (i.e. climate-driven or man-made) influences how displaced individuals are imagined. Lastly, what has become evident from this study, is that considerably more research is needed that allows direct involvement from refugees, which would help us to hear directly from the individuals; their needs, their preferences, and their expertise.

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APPENDIX A: Code tree

Name	Files	References
GOOD CITIZEN	30	130
Benefits to economy	14	52
Good career prior	3	6
Gratefulness	17	28
Grateful to host country	12	17
Grateful to western help	7	11
The entrepeneur	19	44
SELF-REFLECTION	8	34
Celebrity humanitarianism	3	23
Individualization	3	4
Self-reflection audience	3	7
Identity formation	4	9
URGENT PROBLEM	34	115
Climate-driven displacement	6	20
Durable solutions	12	19
Responsibility sharing	3	3
Numerical descriptions	23	50
Problem for host community	2	5
Security at borders	2	4
Technological solutions	7	19
Biometric registration	3	6
Data analytics for needs	3	4
Other	2	6
VULNERABILITY_VICTIM	35	241
Children as victims	21	43
FDP voicing tragedies	11	19
Organization as hero	18	41
Suffering people	22	81
Vulnerability (generally)	13	25
Women's vulnerability	27	62

APPENDIX B: Examples of thematic analysis

Code	Sample quote
Good citizen	
Benefits to economy	"And our work with the World Bank has helped us discuss these things with the government, which now agrees that an approach that includes refugees in the socio-economic life of the country is better. Better for refugees, better for the country and the population that has welcomed them." (UNHCR #2)
Good career prior	"Many of the people who have fled once held good jobs in Venezuela. They were lawyers, business owners, doctors and nurses, government staff and university students." (MC #11)
Gratefulness	
Grateful to host country	"Every day, I'm thankful they opened the doors to me here, because as hard as leaving Venezuela has been for us, it's been much easier than for so many others, thanks to my job, she said." (UNHCR #10)
Grateful to western help	"For her part, Najwa remains ever grateful to Trudy for showing her kindness and helping her through a tough period in her life. We met at a difficult time, but she offered me security and love, and a fresh new life, she said." (UNHCR #2)
The entrepeneur	"Should she and her photography business succeed, it will be monumental for her and her community. Her business would be the first female-owned photography company in Mahweet. Her business would increase women's access to a photographer with highquality equipment and would allow for her clientele to save money by cutting travel costs and support a local business." (MC #8) "While his progression from tech-savvy youngster to technology entrepreneur may appear as logical as the computer programmes he writes, the fact that he did it while living as a Syrian refugee in Jordan is a testament to his own determination and the support of his adopted community." (UNHCR #6)

Code	Sample quote
Urgent problem	
Climate-driven displacement	"Additionally, climate change is driving many young people to migrate from rural areas like Guatemala's highlands. Increasingly extreme and variable climate conditions are reducing agricultural productivity, leading some to sell their land in an effort to finance migration to the U.S. It is estimated that climate change could lead to at least 1.4 million people fleeing their homes from Central America in the next three decades" (MC #6)
Durable solutions	"Temporary displacement sites are seen as a measure of last resort. Authorities expect that these sites will close in 2-3 months in line with a new return, relocation and resettlement strategy, in which 15,000 plots of land will be made available by the government." (IOM #1)
Responsibility sharing	"A more concerted international investment in preparedness and prevention efforts – and broader humanitarian response – is crucial if governments and humanitarian organizations are to effectively save

	more lives and ensure that the outbreak does not impact further the citizens of DRC and it's neighbours." (IOM #12)
Numerical descriptions	"More than 2.1 million people were forced to flee their homes in 2017 alone — equivalent to an average of 50 families fleeing every hour, every day" (MC #9)
Problem for host community	"Colombia is currently hosting more than one million Venezuelans putting pressure on their already-stretched capacity to respond as the country faces ongoing volatility and its own humanitarian crisis" (MC #12)
Security at borders	"Despite a 20-fold increase in funding for border security, the undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. quadrupled between 1986 and 2008. We can't solve this problem unless we address the root causes that drive people to leave." (MC #6)
Technological solutions	
Biometric registration	"The World Bank estimates that over 1 billion people worldwide are unable to provide identification proving who they are. Digital identity is essentially a person's electronic fingerprint — their birth registration, vaccinations, educational certifications, and legal status, all stored online where it can't get lost. We have joined a global alliance that includes Microsoft, GAHI, Ideo.org, Simprints, and a variety of other actors to help promote principles of "good" digital identity." (MC #1)
Data analytics for needs	"Data sources and processing software are becoming increasingly more sophisticated and provide humanitarians with valuable insights into people's most critical needs. Data analytics take complex data sets and consolidate them into comprehensive dashboards that can better inform where and when aid is needed most. These dashboards can help identify safe delivery paths for aid in conflict zones, for instance, or help find better locations to store warehouse goods. These are things that we've shared out with other NGOs we're working with, and now nine other NGOs are using the product we've developed, says Ric Shreves, senior advisor for Technology for Development" (MC #1)
Other	"Distributed ledger technology (DLT) is a collection of data that is synchronised and shared across multiple locations. Unlike systems that rely on one centralised administrator or organization housing all of the data, this technology allows for more transparency, saves time, and creates a more resilient system of data sharing." (MC #1)

Vulnerable victims	
Children as victims	"Some two-thirds of children in Syria have lost a loved one, had their house damaged, or suffered conflict-related injuries. My brother and I are breadwinners and this is a recent change because my father passed away, says one boy." (MC #7)
FDP voicing tragedies	"Joey Butay from Barangay Masikal, Sto. Niño sits together with his wife, Daisy, and daughter, Mary Joy, who has special needs. They tearily recall the events before the storm arrived. "All I could do is fold our clothes and we had to leave. There was not much we could do", says Daisy. When we returned, there was no roof. There were no walls. I can recall the sadness I felt when I saw it." (IOM #5)
Organization as hero	"Despite these hardships, Mercy Corps is one of only a few organizations with team members and local partners working on the front lines of Syria, meeting the urgent needs of a suffering society." (MC #5)

Suffering people	"At first glance, one notices rows of bamboo held together with a piece of black plastic sheeting on top. A closer look reveals pieces of cloth, pots, and other items scattered within and around the bamboo structure. Suddenly, you realize - this is actually their home." (IOM #5) "Jose and his wife Ana Maria had one flour arepa for both of them to eat. I remember looking at her eating it, and just saw her crying, the tears just falling from her eyes, he says." (MC #10)
Vulnerability (generally)	"Civilians, children and the most vulnerable people have been most affected by this. The Syrian war has touched and affected everyone who once had a very peaceful life." (MC #5)
Women's vulnerability	"Thousands of Venezuelans continue to leave the country every day, among them many pregnant women who are unable to receive proper prenatal care and who do not want to put the lives of their unborn children at risk" (UNHCR #15)

Reflection of us	
Celebrity humanitarianism	"With over 4 million Venezuelans now living in exile, UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie today appealed for more leadership, more humanity and more support to countries bearing the brunt of the crisis." (UNHCR #5)
Individualization	"We need to continue investments to build safer, more prosperous communities in Central America so that each person has the chance to build a better life in their own community. You can help. Every single contribution helps us provide more lifesaving relief and support to people in need." (MC #6)
Self-reflection audience	"Career planning is a daunting task for any 20-year-old, not to mention a 20year-old who's living through a civil war. Nevertheless, three weeks into her photography class, Hayat has goals and aspirations for her budding career as a photographer." (MC #8)
Identity formation	"Young Syrians that have accepted and embraced their new roles have redefined purpose in their lives, strengthening their resilience. This sense of purpose is deeply connected to and inspired by how they feel about family and their homeland. 'I wish to have a trade that benefits me, allows me to teach society through it, and also helps my parents,' says one girl." (MC#7)

APPENDIX C: Examples of semiotic analysis of visuals

Figure 1. Woman with two children. From *Quick facts: Venezuela humanitarian crisis*, by Mercy Corps, 2019, https://europe.mercycorps.org/en-gb/blog/quick-facts-venezuela-crisis

Category	Denotation	Connotation
Basic denotation: "Subject" and "symbols"	Pregnant mother with her two children. Living in what seems bad conditions: thin mattress, thin/no pillows. Unfinished walls and floor, clothes on the floor.	The pregnant woman accompanied by her kids represent strong vulnerability. The conditions they are in strengthen this effect, elicits pity.
Photographic techniques: "Gaze", "angle" and "distance"	All looking directly at the camera, at an eye-level/slightly high angle. Dull lighting, 'aura' of light surrounding the three	Non-threatening visibility. The lighting technique makes for a gloomy place, showing the precarious conditions of living
Emotional scene: "Emotional expression" and "atmosphere"	The woman appears to be smiling. The kids are hugging and close their mother. A static atmosphere, as they are sitting down	The three seem to form a close and happy family despite conditions. Static atmosphere suggests them staying there for a while

This photograph was identified to belong to the regime of refugees as "vulnerable victims". The image portrays women's and children's vulnerability, as well as suffering conditions.

Figure 2: Higher Commissioner meeting refugees in Greece. From *UNHCR chief urges action over conditions for asylum-seekers on Greek Island*, by A. Zavallis, 2019, https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2019/11/5ddfa7654/, Copyright 2019 by A. Zavallis/UNHCR

Category	Denotation	Connotation
Basic denotation: "Subject" and "symbols"	Left: Higher Commissioner Grandi. He is holding a branch. Right: Refugees, a young child, three men (one presumably her father).	Grandi is an important figure in the camp he visits. The branch he is holding he received or is giving, showing that he is a nice person. His admiration for kids.
Photographic techniques: "Gaze", "angle" and "distance"	Eye-level angle. Close-up shot. Looking away from camera.	The moment seems very natural as they as looking away, they look unaware of a camera. Depicts genuineness.
Emotional scene: "Emotional expression" and "atmosphere"	The child is lifted up by her father, presenting her to Grandi. All men appear to be smiling. Poetic atmosphere.	The men are having a friendly exchange, they are smiling and presenting themselves to Grandi. Portrays Grandi as a caring, friendly man.

This photograph was identified to belong to the regime of refugees as "reflections of us". The image portrays celebrity humanitarianism.