



# **Media Framing and Tone of Voice in Dutch Newspapers: A Comparative Analysis of the Syrian and Ukrainian Refugee Crisis**

by

Anna Maas (4860209)

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The way issues are portrayed in the media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and policy decisions. This study conducted a comparative content analysis of 200 news articles from Dutch popular and quality newspapers to explore how media framing and tone of voice differ between the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022. Adopting the five generic frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and assessing the tone of voice in headlines and body text, this study revealed significant differences in media coverage of the two crises. The Syrian refugee crisis was primarily framed in terms of responsibility, conflict, and economic consequences, while the Ukrainian refugee crisis was described in a generally positive tone. The type of newspaper had little effect on the framing and tone, suggesting that the nature of the crises themselves had a stronger influence on media portrayals. These results support the ongoing media debate on the perceived double standards in treatment of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees, emphasizing the need for further research and increased awareness among policymakers and journalists to promote balanced and fair representation of refugees.

**Keywords:** media framing, tone of voice, refugee crisis, Syrian refugees, Ukrainian refugees, Dutch newspapers.

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The European Union has shown significant support for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the conflict following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Within eleven days of the invasion, EU member states united to enact legislation granting protection to those fleeing the conflict, marking the first activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) since its adoption in 2001 (Wesolowsky, 2023). While the unified and welcoming response of many European countries to Ukrainian refugees has been praised, it has also sparked debates on the contrasting reception of Syrian refugees back in 2015. Critics in various media outlets have highlighted perceived “double standards” in the treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to Syrian refugees, who, over thirteen years of crisis, never benefited from a law like the TPD and faced considerable obstacles in seeking asylum within European borders (Al-Jazeera, 2022; Alsbeti, 2023).

Several news writers have claimed similar disparities are present in Western news reporting, showing more sympathy for Ukrainian refugees than for other, non-European refugees (Al-Jazeera, 2022; Ellison & Andrews, 2022; CBS News, 2022). A frequently used example involves CBS News journalist Charlie D’Agata, who, without directly mentioning Syria, appeared to differentiate between victims from Ukraine (Europe) and victims from the Middle East (Bayoumi 2022). In a report from late February 2022 on the situation in Kyiv, D’Agata remarked “Ukraine isn’t a place, with all due respect ... that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city, one where you wouldn’t expect that, or hope that it’s going to happen”.

Despite the debate in the media world on the double standards in coverage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis compared to the Syrian Refugee crisis, limited empirical research has been done on the matter. Yet, it is critically important. Previous research has shown that the media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and attitudes toward immigrants and migration (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Daalmans, Schaap & Rovers, 2019; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003; Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). For instance, using metaphors such as "flood" versus "stream" can impact public opinion and policy decisions by portraying refugees as an overwhelming force versus a manageable flow (Daalmans et al., 2019). Such metaphorical language not only affects the public's perception but can also contribute to the dehumanization of refugees or their portrayal as a threat to societal norms (Daalmans et al., 2019; Temizisler, 2023).

This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by performing a comparative content analysis of Dutch newspapers to examine how the framing and tone in media coverage differ between the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022.

## Western media coverage of the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crisis

Western media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis has predominantly been negative (Aswad, 2019; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Dykstra, 2016; El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024; Romano & Porto, 2021). A discourse analysis by Dykstra (2016) pointed to a pattern in Western news coverage that associates Syrian refugees with notions of danger, criminality, and threat. This negative portrayal is reinforced through rhetoric linking refugees to natural disasters impacting host countries and framing them as potential threats and terrorists (Dykstra, 2016). Several studies highlighted the absence of refugee voices in news narratives, presenting Syrian refugees as dehumanized, homogenous, and a threat to the host country's safety and well-being (Bleiker et al., 2013; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024; Toker, 2019). However, not all studies have revealed negative framing. Some research on U.S. local news (Douai, Bastug & Akca, 2022) and British newspapers (Tavassoli, Jalilifar & White, 2019) found more humanitarian and human-interest-focused coverage, with an emphasis on individual stories of suffering and daily struggles of refugees.

In contrast, the portrayal of Ukrainian refugees in the media has been rather positive, with a focus on humanization and individualization (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024; Herat, 2023; Liu, 2019; Munandar & Akmal, 2023; Zawadzka-Palucktau, 2022). In British media coverage, the human-interest frame was most prevalent when reporting on the Ukrainian refugee crisis (Liu, 2019; Munandar & Akmal, 2023). Polish newspapers adopted a neutral or positive tone, framing the refugees as recipients of state help and active, positive contributors to the labor market (Zawadzka-Palucktau, 2022). Similarly, discourse analysis by Herat (2023) on Western media coverage found Ukrainian refugees were typically described as “civilized” in comparison to refugees from the Middle East and North Africa who are “uncivilized” and labeled terrorists.

To date, there are hardly any studies comparing Western media coverage of the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises, and none have been found examining Dutch media coverage on the matter. One study in the United States however has explored this topic. El-Nawawy and Elmasry (2024) conducted a comparative content analysis of American daily newspapers' coverage of the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis and the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis. Their findings suggest that American newspapers are more likely to humanize Ukrainian refugees than Syrian

refugees, often framing Syrian refugees as threats and aggressors. This discrepancy in media portrayal underscores the need for further research to better understand these patterns in Western media.

## Popular versus quality newspapers

Previous research indicates that different types of newspapers use different framing and tone in their media coverage (An & Gower, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) found that quality newspapers – that focus on ‘hard news’ such as domestic and foreign policy, economics, and national security - are more likely to adopt responsibility and conflict frames. Popular newspapers – that focus on ‘soft news’ such as crime, sports, and gossip - are more likely to use the human-interest frame. Popular newspapers tend to have a more negative tone towards immigrants (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008) and refugees (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Tavassoli, Jalilifar & White, 2019) than quality newspapers. Van Gorp (2006) found that popular newspapers often depict asylum seekers as intruders, while quality newspapers are more likely to portray them as victims.

## Framing Theory

*Framing*, as defined by Entman (1993), is the process of “selecting aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52). Frames highlight certain elements in a text while downplaying others, guiding the audience’s interpretation of an issue (Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). Journalists use framing as a strategy to make news more accessible to their audience (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Valkenburg, Semetko & de Vreese, 1999). The ‘power’ in the process of framing is in the hands of news media. By selecting news angles, journalists can define the meaning of a story and guide audience responses, ultimately impacting public opinion and understanding (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Valkenburg, Semetko & de Vreese, 1999). Research shows framing significantly impacts public attitudes on political issues and migration (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006).

In previous research on media framing of refugees, the generic framework of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) has provided a structured approach to analyzing how media content portrays and shapes public perceptions of refugees (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; D’Haenens & De Lange, 2001; Goidefroidt, Berbers & D’Haenens, 2016; Liu, 2019). Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) framework outlines five generic frames most frequently applied by

news media: the human-interest frame, the responsibility frame, the conflict frame, the economic consequences frame, and the morality frame.

The *human-interest frame* brings a human face to an issue, by providing human examples, personal stories and highlighting feelings and emotions (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). By presenting news stories from an emotional angle, journalists evoke emotional responses that can increase positive attitudes toward immigrants and refugees (Parrot, Hoewe, Fan & Huffman, 2019; Stiemel, 2010). The *responsibility frame* attributes responsibility to either the government, group, or individuals in society, for causing or solving an issue (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Through this frame, the media can influence public opinion on who is accountable for important social problems (Iyengar, 1987). The *conflict frame* emphasizes conflict and disagreement between individuals, groups, or institutions (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). De Vreese (2004) found that a narrative written in a conflict frame leads the reader to include more opposing points of view in their thoughts. The *economic consequences frame* reports events in terms of their economic implications, mentioning financial losses/gains, costs, and economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing action (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Given the significant news value of economic impacts (An & Gower, 2009), media use this frame to make issues relevant to the public. Lastly, the *morality frame* can put an event in a moral or more religious context. This frame is connected to ‘moral’ norms and values, and religious and social prescriptions (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; An & Gower, 2009). Because the professional journalistic norm advocates objectivity, journalists often refer to this frame indirectly through quotations or inference (D’Haenens & De Lange, 2001)

## Tone of voice

The content of media coverage is also characterized by its tone of voice. *Tone*, also referred to as sentiment or valence, reflects the author’s attitude toward the subject, characters, or events of a story (Boukes, Van De Velde, Araujo & Vliegthart, 2019). Whether positive, negative, or neutral, tone significantly influences how information is received by the audience. While positive references to refugees in the media are often associated with less concern about immigration among people (Berry et al., 2015; Boomgaarden & Vliegthart, 2009), a negative tone can lead to negative attitudes from the public (Corbu, Buturoiu, Durach, 2017).

Tone can be present in an article's body and headline. Andrew (2007) found that ‘engaged’ readers, who tend to read the full article on a topic of interest, are less likely to be influenced by the tone of an article because of confirmation bias. ‘Non-engaged’ readers, those

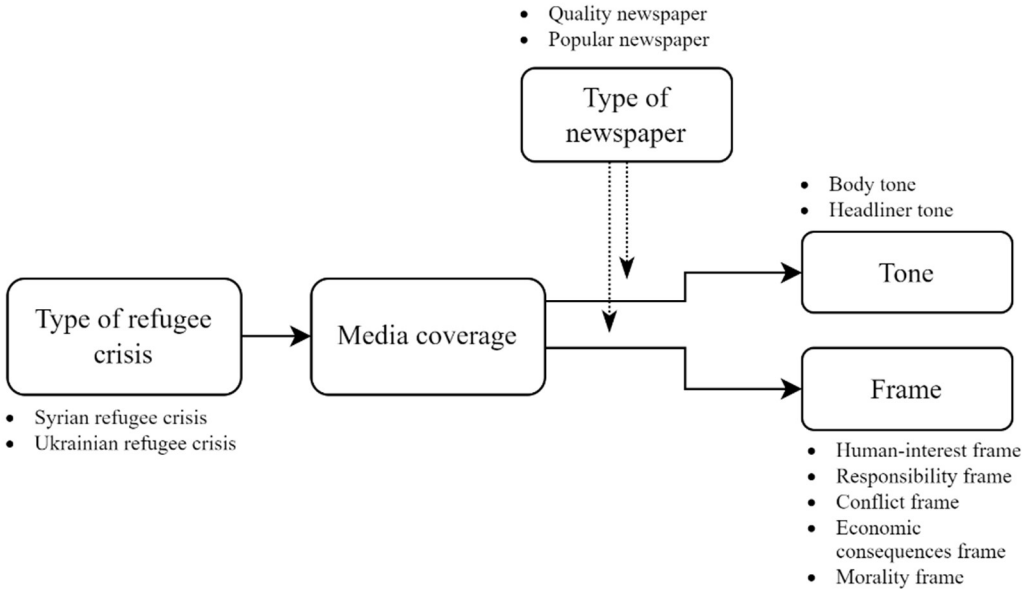
who do not have strong preconceived notions about an issue, are more likely to read only the headline and more likely to be influenced by its tone (Andrew, 2007).

### This study

A comparative content analysis of Dutch newspapers is conducted to address the following research question: *“To what extent does framing and tone of voice of media coverage in Dutch newspapers differ between the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022?”* This study employed an interdisciplinary approach drawing on theories and methodologies from communication studies, political science, and sociology. The content analysis integrated the five generic frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000): human-interest, responsibility, conflict, economic consequences, and morality. These frames help to understand how news narratives are constructed and perceived by readers. Additionally, the tone of voice in media coverage is examined, distinguishing between headliner and body tone. A distinction is made between popular and quality newspapers, exploring possible differences in their coverage. Figure 1 demonstrates a conceptual framework of all relevant concepts in this study.

**Figure 1**

Conceptual model based on the theoretical framework





## Hypotheses

Past research has indicated that Syrian refugees are often dehumanized and portrayed in terms of conflict, economic burden, political responsibility and security (Bleiker et al., 2013; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Dykstra, 2016; El-Nawawy & Elmasry 2024; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Mustafa-Awad & Kirner-Ludwig, 2020; Romano & Porto, 2021). In contrast, Western media coverage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis predominantly uses the human-interest frame (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024; Liu, 2019; Munandar & Akmal, 2023). This leads to the following hypotheses:

**H1:** News articles will apply different frames in the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis compared to the Syrian refugee crisis.

*H1a:* News articles are more likely to employ a human-interest frame in the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis than the Syrian refugee crisis.

*H1b:* News articles are more likely to employ a morality frame in the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis than the Syrian refugee crisis.

*H1c:* News articles are more likely to employ a conflict frame in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis than the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

*H1d:* News articles are more likely to employ an economic consequences frame in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis than the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

*H1e:* News articles are more likely to employ a responsibility frame in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis than the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

The aforementioned studies suggest that the tone of Western media coverage of Syrian refugees tends to be negative (Aswad, 2019; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Dykstra, 2016; El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024), while coverage of Ukrainian refugees tends to be positive (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024; Herat, 2023; Zawadzka-Paluckta, 2022). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H2:** News articles will have a more positive tone towards the Ukrainian refugee crisis than the Syrian refugee crisis.

*H2a:* News articles will have a more positive headliner tone towards the Ukrainian refugee crisis than the Syrian refugee crisis.

*H2b:* News articles will have a more positive body tone towards the Ukrainian refugee crisis than the Syrian refugee crisis.

Previous research shows that quality newspapers and popular newspapers tend to apply different frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; van Gorp, 2006; An & Gower, 2009) and a different tone of voice (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Tavassoli, Jalilifar & White, 2019). To explore the interactions between newspaper type and crisis type, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H3:** The framing in media coverage of the refugee crises will differ depending on the type of newspaper.

**H4:** The tone of voice in media coverage of the refugee crises will differ depending on the type of newspaper.

## Methods

### Study Design

To examine the media coverage of Dutch quality and popular newspapers on the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crisis, this study employed content analysis, a quantitative method appropriate for news content comparisons. The content analysis focused on two key aspects: the framing and tone of voice of the media coverage. The framing analysis followed a deductive approach, using the generic frames derived from the framework of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), as there is a clear idea of what frames to expect based on the vast amount of reliable literature (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; D'Haenens & De Lange, 2001; Goidefroidt, Berbers & D'Haenens, 2016; Liu, 2019). In addition, the tone of voice of the media coverage was determined, ranging from negative to positive, in line with the study by Boukes et al. (2020). A distinction is made between the headliner tone and body tone (Andrews, 2007). This combined approach allows for a systematic comparison of how the different refugee crises are portrayed in Dutch media.

## Study sample

This study examined the four national newspapers with the highest circulation rates in the Netherlands: Telegraaf, Algemeen Dagblad (AD), NRC, and De Volkskrant. Telegraaf has a readership of 15% of the Dutch population, AD, 10%, De Volkskrant, 7%, and NRC, 4%. Telegraaf and AD are considered popular newspapers and NRC and De Volkskrant quality newspapers (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

The timeframes selected for this analysis align with the study by El-Nawawy and Elmasry (2024). For the Syrian refugee crisis, articles were selected from the period August 1 to October 31, 2015. This three-month timeframe became widely recognized as the core of the “2015 European refugee crisis” (Bauder, 2016; Kingsley, 2016) and corresponds to a period marked by media discussions, triggered by the tragic death of two-year-old Alan Kurdi, who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while his family attempted to escape to Europe (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024). For the Ukrainian refugee crisis, the study focused on a comparable three-month window, from March 1 to May 31, 2022. This timeframe was marked by a heightened influx of refugees, resulting in over six million Ukrainians being displaced, primarily within Europe, by the end of May 2022. Simultaneously, it was characterized by substantial political and media deliberations (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024).

The unit of analysis was the individual newspaper article. Articles were retrieved from the Lexis Nexis online database, filtered by the specified timeframes, and the four newspapers under study. To identify articles about the Syrian refugee crisis, the search terms “Syri\*”, “vluchteling\*” and “asielzoeker\*”, while “Oekrai\*” and “vluchteling\*” were used for articles about the Ukrainian refugee crisis. This search resulted in a total of 2170 news articles. For each refugee crisis, a random selection of 25 articles was made for each newspaper using an online randomizer tool. This approach resulted in a total of 200 articles, comprising 25 articles per newspaper for each refugee crisis. Only articles that dealt centrally with the refugee crisis were examined; those that mentioned refugees only tangentially were excluded. If an article did not meet this inclusion criterion, a new article was randomly selected from that subset.

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G\*Power version 3.1.9.7 to determine the minimum sample size required to test the study’s main hypothesis regarding framing (Faul et al., 2007). Results indicated the required sample size to achieve 95% power for detecting a medium effect ( $w = 0.3$ ), at a significance criterion of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , was  $N = 191$  for a Chi-square

test of independence. The final sample size obtained for the study was 200, ensuring sufficient power to detect a significant effect if one exists.

## Data and measurements

The final sample of 200 randomly selected articles was coded manually in Excel. To ensure reliability of the coding process a detailed codebook was developed, providing clear definitions and examples of each category which can be found in Appendix A. The codebook for the framing analysis is derived from the conceptual framework of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). To assess the prevalence of the frames within the selected news articles, a questionnaire comprising 17 binary (yes/no) questions was employed (See Appendix A). These were questions such as “Does the story provide a human example or 'human face' on the issue or problem?” (human-interest). A ‘yes’ response to any of these questions signified the existence of the corresponding frame within the article, meaning that multiple frames could exist in one article. The original framework of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) consists of 18 questions, but one item related to visual information has been removed, as LexisNexis only provides the text of an article, not the images.

Following the frame analysis, different tones were determined and coded in line with the study on sentiment analysis by Boukes et al. (2020). For the tone of the headline, the codebook included the question: “What is the tone of the headline with regards to the Syrian/Ukrainian refugee crisis?”. The coding was done on a three-point scale: -1 (negative); 0 (neutral, no tone, or mixed positive and negative); and 1 (positive). Negative headlines were critical towards refugees (e.g. “Refugees? Not in my backyard”) or contained negative metaphors (e.g. “Tsunami of refugees”), while positive headlines were supportive and welcoming towards refugees (e.g. “Refugees warmly welcomed at local sport club”). Neutral headlines or headlines that did not specifically mention the refugee crisis were coded as 0.

To determine the tone of the body of the article, the codebook included the question: “What is the tone of the body of the article with regards to the Syrian/Ukrainian refugee crisis?”. This was assessed using a five-point scale: -2 (negative, e.g., portraying refugees as a burden or drain on public resources), -1 (mixed but mainly negative), 0 (neutral or mixed), 1 (mixed but mainly positive), and 2 (positive, e.g., supportive of refugees and critical of excessively negative attitudes towards them). The tone of an article’s headline was coded before reading the article’s body to ensure that the content of the full text did not influence the judgment of the headline.

## Data analysis

Statistical tests were conducted using SPSS Statistics version 29.0.1 to test the proposed hypotheses. The chi-square test of independence was used to compare the distribution of frames by crisis type and newspaper type. For interpreting the chi-square test of independence, the Pearson chi-square value was used, unless more than 20% of cells had expected frequencies less than five. In such cases, Fisher's exact test was applied, as the approximation method would be inadequate (Kim, 2017). Two-way MANOVA test was performed to determine significant differences in tones based on crisis type and newspaper type, followed by post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni correction.

## Results

### Descriptives

Using the search criteria, there were 1050 search results for the Syrian refugee crisis (quality newspapers  $N = 568$ , popular newspapers  $N = 482$ ) and 1120 search results for the Ukrainian refugee crisis (quality newspapers  $N = 610$ , popular newspapers  $N = 510$ ). The final sample size consisted of 200 articles, with 25 articles randomly selected from each newspaper for each crisis, as outlined in the method section.

### Generic frames

The usage frequency of generic frames in the analyzed news articles is demonstrated in Table 1. Fisher's exact test showed no statistically significant association between the human-interest frame and crisis type ( $p = .445$ ). A chi-square test of independence indicated a significant relationship between the responsibility frame and the crisis type,  $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 4.50, p < .05$ . The Syrian refugee crisis was more often framed with the responsibility frame (86%) compared to the Ukrainian refugee crisis (74%). The relation between the conflict frame and crisis type was also significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 26.01, p < .001$ . The conflict frame was more frequently applied in news articles about the Syrian refugee crisis (65%) than in news articles about the Ukrainian refugee crisis (29%). A chi-square test of independence revealed a significant association between the economic consequences frame and crisis type,  $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 17.32, p < .001$ . The Syrian refugee crisis was more often framed with an economic consequences frame (56%), compared to the Ukrainian refugee crisis (27%). No significant

association was found for the morality frame versus the type of crisis,  $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 3.44, p = .064$ .

Furthermore, quality newspapers applied a conflict frame more often than popular newspapers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 5.14, p < .05$ . Additional chi-square tests showed no significant association between type of newspaper and the other generic frames, as demonstrated in Table 1 in Appendix B.

**Table 1**

Frequencies and Chi-Square Results for Generic Frames in Media Coverage per Refugee Crisis Type

|  | Syrian refugee crisis<br>( <i>N</i> = 100) | Ukrainian refugee<br>crisis ( <i>N</i> = 100) | $\chi^2$ |
|--|--|---|----------|
| <b>Human interest frame</b>            | 95%  | 98%   | 1.33     |
| <b>Responsibility frame</b>            | 86%  | 74%   | 4.50*    |
| <b>Conflict frame</b>                  | 65%  | 29%   | 26.01*** |
| <b>Economic<br/>consequences frame</b> | 56%  | 27%   | 17.32*** |
| <b>Morality frame</b>                  | 50%  | 37%   | 3.44     |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Tone of voice

A two-way MANOVA was run with two independent variables – crisis type and newspaper type – and two dependent variables – headliner tone and body tone. Headliner tone and body tone were combined to assess general tone of voice. Table 2 in Appendix B presents the outcomes of the MANOVA. The interaction effect between type of crisis and type of newspaper on the combined dependent variables was not statistically significant  $F(2, 195) = 1.48, p = .230$ ; Wilk’s lambda = .985,  $\eta^2 = .015$ . There was non-significant difference in tone based on type of newspaper,  $F(2, 195) = 0.40, p = .674$ ; Wilk’s lambda = .996,  $\eta^2 = .004$ .

There was a statistically significant main effect between crisis type and the combined dependent variables  $F(2, 195) = 14.83, p < .001$ ; Wilk’s lambda = .868,  $\eta^2 = .132$ . Follow-up univariate two-way ANOVAs were run, and the main effect of crisis type was considered. Table

2 shows a statistically significant main effect of crisis type for headliner tone ( $F(2, 195) = 12.94$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .062$ ) and body tone ( $F(2, 195) = 27.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .121$ ).

As such, Bonferroni pairwise comparisons were run for the differences in mean headliner tone and mean body tone between crisis types. On a scale from -1 to 1, the marginal means for headliner tone were 0.16 ( $SE = 0.05$ ) for articles on the Ukrainian refugee crisis and -0.09 ( $SE = 0.05$ ) for articles on the Syrian refugee crisis, a statistically significant mean difference of 0.25, 95% CI [0.11, 0.39]. On a scale from -2 to 2, the marginal means for body tone were 1.18 ( $SE = 0.11$ ) for articles on the Ukrainian refugee crisis and 0.36 ( $SE = 0.11$ ) for articles on the Syrian refugee crisis, a statistically significant mean difference of 0.25, 95% CI [0.51, 1.13].

**Table 2**

Means, Standard Deviations, and MANOVA Results of Tone of Voice in Media Coverage of the Refugee Crises

|                       | Syrian refugee crisis |      | Ukrainian refugee crisis |      | $F(2, 195)$ | $\eta^2$ |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|------|--------------------------|------|-------------|----------|
|                       | $M$                   | $SD$ | $M$                      | $SD$ |             |          |
| <b>Headliner tone</b> | -0.09                 | 0.55 | 0.16                     | 0.42 | 12.94***    | .062     |
| <b>Body tone</b>      | 0.36                  | 1.25 | 1.18                     | 0.96 | 27.02***    | .121     |

*Note.*  $M$ = mean,  $SD$ = standard deviation.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Discussion

This study aimed to uncover potential differences in Dutch media coverage of the Syrian the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The findings reveal that news articles applied different frames when reporting on the two refugee crises. Specifically, the Syrian refugee crisis was more often framed in terms of responsibility, conflict, and economic consequences compared to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. These results are consistent with previous studies, which suggested that Syrian refugees are often portrayed in terms of conflict, economic burden, and political responsibility (Mustafa-Awad & Kirner-Ludwig, 2020; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). There were no significant relationships between the human-interest and morality frames and the type of refugee crisis. Contrary to earlier findings by El-Nawawy and Elmasry (2024), in

this study, the human-interest frame was nearly equally present in the coverage of both Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. A probable reason could be that the human-interest frame coded not only for the humanization of refugees but also for citizens affected by the refugee crisis.

Moreover, this study found that media coverage had a more positive tone of voice towards the Ukrainian refugee crisis compared to the Syrian refugee crisis. These results align with previous studies indicating that the tone of media coverage on the Syrian refugee crisis is relatively negative (Aswad, 2019; Dykstra, 2016; El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024), while the tone of the coverage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis is generally positive (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024; Herat, 2023; Zawadzka-Paluckta, 2022). The effect of tone was observed in both the headlines and the body text, indicating it impacts both engaged and non-engaged readers (Andrew, 2007).

In line with Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), the results indicate that quality newspapers more frequently apply a conflict frame compared to popular newspapers. However, this study further revealed that the type of newspaper had no additional effects on the overall framing and tone of both refugee crises. These findings contrast with previous research that suggests that popular newspapers tend to adopt a more negative tone when reporting on refugee crises compared to quality newspapers (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Tavassoli, Jalilifar & White, 2019). A possible reason for this discrepancy could be the different contexts; the studies by Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) and Tavassoli, Jalilifar, and White (2019) were conducted in Germany and the UK, where there may be a stronger distinction between quality and popular newspapers. Additionally, there was no significant interaction effect between newspaper type, crisis type, and tone of voice. These results suggest that differences in media coverage may be more strongly influenced by the nature of the crises themselves rather than by the type of newspaper.

To interpret the results of this study, it is important to consider the broader geopolitical context. The time-lapse and differing political contexts between the Syrian and Ukrainian crises likely influenced their portrayal in the media. Coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis may have increased awareness and sensitivity toward humanitarian issues and prompted changes in editorial policies. Exploring these factors could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the media coverage of both crises.

## Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged as they may affect the interpretation and the generalizability of the findings. Firstly, the research was conducted with



a random sample of 200 news articles from four newspapers with the highest circulation rates in the Netherlands. While this sample provides valuable insights, it limits the generalizability of the findings to other newspapers or countries. To enhance the external validity of the results a follow-up study could consider larger and more diverse samples across various newspapers and geographical regions. Another limitation is the lack of inter-coder reliability as the data in this study were analyzed by a single coder. Despite using a strict codebook derived from theory, to ensure stronger reliability, a future study would benefit from involving multiple coders.

This study applied a deductive approach focusing on the five generic frames, potentially overlooking other frames such as nationalization or Islam-as-a-threat (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2024). Additionally, the quantitative content analysis used, while proven effective for analyzing framing and tone-of-voice, is less useful for uncovering implicit meanings or providing nuanced explanations for why patterns exist. Future research could address these limitations by employing a broader range of frames or adopting an inductive approach to include emerging frames during data analysis. Additionally, using the sociology of news approach could help explain the underlying reasons for content patterns.

## Implications and recommendations

The way the refugee crises were discussed in media at the beginning of the conflict played a crucial role in framing the issues and influencing public opinion and policymakers alike (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Daalmans, Schaap & Rovers, 2019; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003; Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). The Syrian refugee crisis was often framed in terms of economic burden, conflict, and political responsibility, possibly inducing fear and more opposing views by the public. Whereas the Ukrainian refugee crisis was portrayed in a more positive narrative, contributing to a more favorable public sentiment toward the refugees. The differential framing of both refugee crises likely contributed to the double standards in how both refugees were received by many European countries at the time.

The findings of this study highlight the need for further investigation into this underrepresented topic within the scientific field. Further research could expand on the theoretical framework of this study to explore the different media coverage of various refugee crises and uncover underlying meanings. Civil society, the media industry, and migration stakeholders should pay greater attention to negative and discriminatory narratives as well as double standards portrayed by the media towards asylum seekers and actively promote equal

and fair narratives. As such, journalists need to report ethically and accurately on crises and for policymakers to consider a range of perspectives and sources of information when making decisions. These efforts will help ensure a more balanced and fair representation of refugees, thereby supporting better-informed decision-making by the public and policymakers.

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# Appendix A

## Codebook

**Table 1**

Codebook for Generic Frames based on the Framework by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and Tone of Voice (Boukes et al., 2020)

| Code | Frames                    | Code | Explanation   |
|------|---------------------------|------|---|
| 1    | Human-interest            | 1    | Does the story provide a human example or 'human face' on the issue or problem?   |
|      |                           | 2    | Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the issue or problem?   |
|      |                           | 3    | Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy or caring, or sympathy or compassion? |
|      |                           | 4    | Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?   |
| 2    | Responsibility            | 1    | Does the story suggest that some level of government (Dutch or European) has the ability to alleviate the issue or problem?             |
|      |                           | 2    | Does the story suggest that some level of the government (Dutch or European) is responsible for the issue or problem?                   |
|      |                           | 3    | Does the story suggest that an individual, or a group of people in society, is responsible for the issue/problem?                       |
|      |                           | 4    | Does the story suggest solution(s) for the problem or issue?  |
| 3    | Conflict                  | 1    | Does the story reflect disagreement between parties-individuals-groups-countries?   |
|      |                           | 2    | Does one party-individual-group-country reproach another?   |
|      |                           | 3    | Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the problem or issue?  |
| 4    | Economic consequences     | 1    | Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?   |
|      |                           | 2    | Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?   |
|      |                           | 3    | Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?   |
| 5    | Morality                  | 1    | Does the story contain any moral message?   |
|      |                           | 2    | Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave?   |
|      |                           | 3    | Does the story make a reference to morality, God and other religious tenets?  |
|      | Headliner tone            |      | What is the tone of the headline with regards to the Syrian/Ukrainian refugee crisis?   |
| -1   | Negative                  |      | Critical of refugees.<br>Example: Frustrations grow over the unstoppable flow of refugees   |
| 0    | Neutral, mixed or no tone |      | Does not mention refugees specifically or is neither supportive nor critical of refugees.   |

|           |                           |   |
|-----------|---------------------------|---|
|           |                           | Example: Refugees almost all arrive at Amsterdam Central Station.   |
| <b>+1</b> | Positive                  | Supportive of refugees.<br>Examples: Refugees warmly welcomed.  |
|           | Body tone                 | What is the tone of the body of the article with regards to the Syrian/Ukrainian refugee crisis?  |
| <b>-2</b> | Negative                  | Uses derogatory, hostile or dehumanizing language towards refugees.<br>Example: We must take drastic measures to prevent more refugees from entering.   |
| <b>-1</b> | Mixed but mainly negative | Uses critical or disapproving language, but includes some neutral or slightly negative aspects.<br>Example: The influx of refugees has led to some cultural enrichment, but the strain on public services and infrastructure cannot be ignored.                               |
| <b>0</b>  | Neutral, mixed or no tone | Neither overtly supportive nor overtly critical of refugees.<br>Example: Refugees are being provided with necessities in the AZC's.   |
| <b>1</b>  | Mixed but mainly positive | Uses generally supportive or approving language, but includes some neutral or slightly negative aspects.<br>Example: Many refugees are finding employment and contributing to the economy, but occasional tensions with locals highlight ongoing challenges                   |
| <b>2</b>  | Positive                  | Uses highly supportive or admiring language.<br>Example: Local businesses have benefited from the arrival of refugees, who bring diverse skills and a strong work ethic. Employers report high levels of satisfaction and commend the refugees' contributions to their teams. |

# Appendix B

## Additional Tables of the Results

**Table 1**

Frequencies and Chi-Square Results for Generic Frames in Media Coverage per Newspaper Type

|                                    | Quality newspaper<br>(N = 100) | Popular newspaper<br>(N = 100) | $\chi^2$ |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| <b>Human interest frame</b>        | 96%                            | 97%                            | 0.15     |
| <b>Responsibility frame</b>        | 79%                            | 81%                            | 0.13     |
| <b>Conflict frame</b>              | 55%                            | 39%                            | 5.14*    |
| <b>Economic consequences frame</b> | 43%                            | 40%                            | 0.19     |
| <b>Morality frame</b>              | 43%                            | 44%                            | 0.02     |

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 2**

MANOVA Results of Tone of Voice per Crisis Type, Newspaper Type and Interaction Effects

|                                     | Wilk's Lambda | F(2, 195) | p     | $\eta^2$ |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-----------|-------|----------|
| <b>Crisis type</b>                  | 0.868         | 14.83     | <.001 | 0.132    |
| <b>Newspaper type</b>               | 0.996         | 0.40      | .674  | 0.004    |
| <b>Crisis type x newspaper type</b> | 0.985         | 1.48      | .230  | 0.015    |

# Appendix C

## Syntax SPSS

CROSSTABS

```
/TABLES=humanframe    responsibilityframe    conflictframe    economicconsequencesframe  
moralityframe BY
```

```
    crisis krant
```

```
/FORMAT=AVALUE TABLES
```

```
/STATISTICS=CHISQ PHI
```

```
/CELLS=COUNT EXPECTED ROW COLUMN ASRESID
```

```
/COUNT ROUND CELL.
```

GLM Tone\_headline tone\_body BY crisis krant

```
/METHOD=SSTYPE(3)
```

```
/INTERCEPT=INCLUDE
```

```
/POSTHOC=krant crisis(BONFERRONI)
```

```
/EMMEANS=TABLES(crisis) COMPARE ADJ(BONFERRONI)
```

```
/EMMEANS=TABLES(crisis*krant) COMPARE(crisis) ADJ(BONFERRONI)
```

```
/EMMEANS=TABLES(crisis*krant) COMPARE(krant) ADJ(BONFERRONI)
```

```
/EMMEANS=TABLES(krant) COMPARE ADJ(BONFERRONI)
```

```
/PRINT=DESCRIPTIVE ETASQ
```

```
/CRITERIA=ALPHA(.05)
```

```
/DESIGN= crisis krant crisis*krant.
```