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## Comparing connotations: investigating the long-term mechanisms of the online news framing of refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands

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**Comparing connotations: investigating the long-term mechanisms of the online news  
framing of refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands**

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Master Thesis



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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines in what ways the online news media has framed refugees and asylum seekers who arrived in Europe and specifically the Netherlands during the refugee crisis that started in 2015. Carrying out a qualitative content analysis of all news articles on refugees uploaded over a period of six years, it has been possible to construct four distinct connotative frames that used to depict refugees: normalization, victimization, burden and threat. The results show that on the long-term, the victimization-frame turned out to be the most popular frame to use on refugees. Additionally, online news turns out to be susceptible to the occurrence of key events, which occurrence determines the dominant frame of the subsequent weeks. This study nuances the idea that refugees are increasingly portrayed negatively by providing a long-term insight and shows the diffuse process and developments that have occurred over time.

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## INTRODUCTION

Originally, when refugees started to cross the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to reach Europe around the summer of 2015, this did not happen unnoticed. For the first years, new sources across the European continent reported extensively on any developments in what was called the ‘largest global forced displacement’ since the end of the Second World War (UN, 2014). Nevertheless, at current times, things seem to have changed.

The novelty of the refugee crisis at first mainly seemed to lead to public anxiety and increasing negative perceptions of refugees within Europe (Vincze, Meza & Balaban, 2021). The displaced were often framed by newspapers as an acute threat to European societies (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). However, this peak of media attention has stabilized over the years, and many different factors and mechanisms have come into play. Media channels have been changing in its nature, refugees have been trying to integrate within their host societies and the issue of forced migration has increased in political sensitivity. However, one phenomenon remained unchanged: new refugees have continued to reach Europe by risking their lives on sea. Even in 2020, when the pandemic of COVID-19 ended most travel routes, more than 90,000 refugees tried to cross the European waters, from whom 1401 have died or are missing (UNHCR, 2021).

To a great extent, refugee asylum and integration has become a disputed issue within the political debate in Europe after the start of the crisis – and still has remained salient until present day. For this reason, understanding the mechanisms and ways asylum seekers are being framed in news media remains important, as this framework can have significant effect on the attitudes of the host population towards the integration of refugees (Esses et al., 2011; Greenaway et al., 2014; Kotzur, Forsbach & Wagner, 2017).

A substantial body of research has already dived into the framing mechanisms of refugees in traditional newspapers. However, most studies are focused on the large peak in media attention during the beginning years of the crisis and have not yet been able to provide and updated, long-term perspective. Furthermore, it is important to notice that the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe is not only unprecedented in its scale, it is also the first refugee crisis that has been documented online for its full length (Konings and Notten, 2021). Therefore, investigating this event through from the perspective of online news platforms might lead to discovery of certain framing mechanisms that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Konings and Notten (2021) demonstrate that while previous studies found that news media tends to frame refugees negatively, ‘internet news’ in the Netherlands showed a careful trend of portraying refugees in

a more positive manner between 2015 and 2016. This more contemporary and modern news media portrayal of refugees has however not been researched thoroughly yet on a longer term.

Therefore, this study examines the online long-term media coverage of the refugee crisis in the Netherlands between July 2015 and July 2021. It will focus on the rise of ‘internet news’ and how this media source frames refugees, by discovering which themes are connected to the displaced often and whether these themes have changed over time. The research question is as follows:

*RQ: what are the long-term, diverging patterns of the online news framing of refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands since the beginning of the refugee crisis?*

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Evolution of the framing of immigrants and refugees in Europe**

First of all, this section consists of a brief contextualization of different experiences of immigration in multiple European countries since the beginning of the refugee crisis. Traditionally, this migration crisis started to gain media attention after large flows of refugees arrived in Italy in the spring of 2015, leading to several shipwrecks causing the deaths of hundreds of migrants. From the moment immigrants and refugees arrived in Europe during the crisis, an increase in anti-immigration discourse could be perceived, along with certain political parties gaining more influence (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Burscher, van Spanje & de Vreese, 2015). The combination of these developments have led to a growth in media coverage regarding the topic of migration (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). At the same time, various polls indicate that this influx of refugees into Europe marked a turning-point in the attitudes the population in most European countries have towards immigrants (Crawley and McMahon, 2016).

It is therefore important to gain further insight in the evolution of this type of discourse in the media and how this discourse is related to perceptions towards refugees. Multiple studies have discussed how negative and dismissive attitudes can be a precursor to more extreme forms of discrimination, such as hate speech (Contrada et al., 2001; Arcila-Calderón, Blanco-Herrero, Valdez-Apolo, 2020) which on their turn can lead to hate crimes and violence (Müller & Schwarz, 2020). These trends show the relevance of investigating the attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, especially during a migratory crisis such as the one occurring in Europe.

The majority of the studies that have previously analysed the manner in which Western media perceives immigrants and asylum seekers found that a link exists between these attitudes and the image of these groups as either a burden or a threat to the host societies (Amores, Arcila-Calderón, Blanco-Herrero, 2020). Hence, media can influence the attitudes of societies towards certain groups such as immigrants and refugees (Cheng et al., 2014, Entman, 1992) through the use of framing. In more recent years, studies have focused on the European migration crisis to investigate the framing of the media.

Frames that are likely to shape fearful and negative stereotypes of refugees among citizens are also likely to negatively affect the attitudes of those citizens towards refugees (Kotzur, Forsbach & Wagner, 2017; de Vreese, 2002). These dehumanizing portrayals of refugees as a threat are likely to reduce support for assisting refugees in their integration process (Esses et al., 2011; European Commission, 2011; Firmstone et al., Greenaway et al., 2014; Vincze, Meza & Balaban, 2021). In the same vein, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) found that within mass media coverage, refugees usually can be grouped into three types, in which they are represented as: “passive victims, as threat to culture, security and welfare to the host country, or as dehumanized, anonymous (out)group” (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017, p. 1751).

However, in recent years, media sources are expanding from traditional channels to digital channels. Despite the existence of several studies which have examined the framing of the refugee crisis through digital channels, such as the research from Gil-Ramírez and Gómez-de-Travesedo (2020), there is no general consensus on how online news media, ‘internet news’, can influence the attitudes that European citizens have towards immigration and asylum seekers. Contradicting earlier studies on traditional news sources, the study of Konings and Notten (2021) for instance suggests that internet news tends to highlight the positive aspects of asylum seekers who came to the Netherlands more often than the negative effects. On the other hand, internet news seems to be more sensitive to the level of ‘newsworthiness’ of issues than traditional newspapers and therefore tends to gravitate more towards contested issues to write about (Konings & Notten, 2021; Laor & Galily, 2020).

Another interesting framing mechanism is brought to light by Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017), who researched the media coverage of the refugee crisis on the basis of so-called ‘key events’. They discovered several key events that caused a sharp increase in media attention and influenced the news agenda significantly. For instance, if such an event involved refugees in a negative way, this would result in a spill-over to other news coverage who would pick up this tone of voice and write about refugees in a negative tone of voice. In other words, the frame

that becomes dominant after the occurrence of a large event regarding refugees has the same connotation as the event itself.

### **The Netherlands and the refugee crisis**

When investigating the political trends towards immigration and refugees in Europe, the Netherlands could serve as a typical case. The Netherlands used to carry the international reputation of being a tolerant, lenient and liberal country which produced progressive and foreigner-friendly policies. However, in more recent years, new nationalist parties started to emerge in the political climate, changing the direction of the discourse towards migrants and asylum seekers (van der Woude, 2018). The 2015 refugee crisis also created a large influx of refugees towards this country, with the number of applications reaching a peak in the second half of 2015 (CBS, 2016). According to the Eurobarometer, a majority of Dutch citizens had predominantly positive feelings toward migration from non-EU countries. (European Commission, 2018). Brouwer et al., (2017) found that media attention for unauthorized immigrants had decreased to a minimum within the period of 15 years prior to the refugee crisis. Moreover, the nature of this coverage was increasingly less negative. Nevertheless, the few peaks in media attention are often concentrated around political debates or controversies involving unauthorized migrants. On the other hand, events that could also be perceived as ‘high-profile’ and linked to unauthorized migrants – such as a fire at the immigration detention centre that killed 11 people – did not cause as much an increase in media attention for (Brouwer et al., 2017, p. 108). This trend seems to be similar to what Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) noted in the United Kingdom around the same time, where immigrants were merely the topic of political debate, more or less dehumanized as an “issue” instead of real people.

In line with the surge of refugees arrivals during the refugee crisis, the news coverage of refugees in Dutch newspapers also increased, given the assumption that the newsworthiness of refugees was especially high if they were doing wrong or misbehaving (Konings & Notten, 2021). As such frames can be labelled as ‘negative’, this negatively influences the attitude of the Dutch population towards the integration process of the refugees (Kotzur, Forsbach & Wagner 2017). Nevertheless, Konings and Notten (2021) distinguished a trend suggesting otherwise when solely looking at news on internet platforms. The user network of internet is still expanding in the Netherlands, unlike the percentage of people who watch TV (MSS, 2016). According the public opinion survey of the Eurobarometer, the percentage of Dutch people that believed migration was the most important issue facing their country rose from 8% in 2011 to 56% in 2016 (Crawley and McMahon, 2016). This high salience of the refugee crisis as a topic



generates a high degree of newsworthiness, to which internet news is sensitive (Konings & Notten, 2021). As Georgiou and Zabarowski (2017) suggest, traditional news coverage is already somewhat concentrated around key events. For a country such as the Netherlands, where refugees are currently integrating while still being controversial, it is important to shed a light on such a mechanism, as its presence might have affected the Dutch public opinion on refugees strongly.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **The Othering of the newly arrived**

The study of attitudes and discrimination towards immigrants stems from studies about social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and focuses on the rejection of the ‘other’. Within societies, these ‘Others’ assure people that they belong to a certain group. This notion of ‘Othering’ is important to grasp in order to understand how societies categorize or even construct identities. The French social theorist de Beauvoir (2011) stresses that the process of categorizing the Other, the so-called process of Othering, is a fundamental element of human thought processes, as no group can recognize itself without immediately juxtaposing itself against the Other. The practice of Othering comes with a paradoxical dichotomy, as one defines Self through the Other (Charon, 1992).

The process of Othering can occur between individuals as well as on group-level. Within the context of groups, discourses about the Other are usually expressed in a negative portrayal. Members of a dominant group often use subtle –but nevertheless impactful –negative discourse when they direct or describe members of other groups. This construction of group identities is thus accompanied with marginalizing Others and ascribing them an inferior status (MacNaughton, Davis & Smith, 2009). This perception of the Other defines how one identifies oneself and subsequently impacts the feeling of belonging to a community.

Said (1978) argues that in order to understand the construction of an ‘Oriental’ identity, it is necessary to approach the phenomenon as a colonizing discourse that eventually even obscures the humanity of the Other. According to Nurullah (2010), if it concerns Muslims and Arabs, the Other is usually presented by Western media as “synonymous with the concept of terrorism itself” (Nurullah, 2010, p. 1022). This securitizing discourse continues to be used by politicians to direct immigrant Others, creating a fear that can be used for ‘us versus them’-

politics. In this way, the political elite can assign themselves the role as the hero who saves the citizens from the dangerous invader (Tamatea, 2011). In combination with a security discourse, othering here thus frames the Other as a dehumanized, physical threat to society.

Matejskova (2011) describes how it is presumed within Europe's major immigrant countries that the responsibility of integration and the issues with discrimination and exclusion stands or falls with the effort of the immigrants themselves. However, the host society's own attitude and practices towards immigrants have played a substantial role in affecting the incorporation process of immigrants. Drawing on the notion of identities as being relational as well as contingent, research has focussed on the process of Othering within everyday interaction between the host societies and immigrants. For example, the general national traditions to depict immigrants as Others in official discourse as well as mainstream media often lays the foundation of how the host population constructs identities (Kastoryano, 2002; Pratt, 2005 & Nurullah, 2010).

However, the structure of these relations seem to alter slightly when the focus of the subjects expands from immigrants to refugees and asylum seekers. In the context of Europe, the attitude of civil society plays a crucial role in determining the degree of support displayed towards the newly arrived people (Wyszynski, Guerra & Bierwiazzonek, 2020). Nevertheless, sources such as news media and politicians use different terms and labels interchangeably when they refer to these people; such as European migrant crisis or refugee crisis when describing the situation that started in 2015 (Goodman et al., 2017).

Important to notice here is the observation that different labels provoke different reactions from the host population, impacting the relations between groups within a society. Research shows that these labels affect which emotions the displaced are associated with and thus which reactions their arrival provoke amongst the host population (Kotzur et al. 2017).

### **The powerful tool of framing**

In social relations, labels and linguistic representations are key elements in shaping social relations, as they create intergroup dynamics and shape their meanings (Wyszynski, Guerra & Bierwiazzonek, 2020). As demonstrated by the aforementioned literature, the process of framing and categorization of groups goes through language, which is sensitive to subtle connotations – especially when it concerns topics or groups that are politically or socially sensitive. Framing is one of the most widely used theories to investigate the representation of immigration in the media, as it gives room to an approach that is able to filter on specific topics. The foundation of this theory lies in way it can effect public opinion through the reference

frames that are actively constructed by the media (Tuchman, 2002). The process of framing starts with choosing what problems are interesting enough to report on and are thus newsworthy. The framing method entails stressing certain aspects of the problem while simultaneously downplaying the salience of other aspects. This creates a news bias, which influences the reader to draw conclusions in a certain way (Entman, 1993).

In the field of social psychology, several studies have distinguished different subcategories to people who arrived newly to a country (Murray & Marx, 2013; Kotzur et al. 2017). Cole (2020) has constructed a theory on how the *idea* of a refugee is produced through framing and how it has created a framework where an inside and an outside exists on a structural level. When the refugee is not being acknowledged as a capable political actor, they become a “problem that has to be solved” (Cole, 2020, p. 37) in the eyes of people residential in the host country and who are thus already included. In this way, the outsiders remain outsiders – marginalised and powerless (Cole, 2020). From this viewpoint, framing could thus be perceived as an ‘Othering’-technique. In similar vein, van Dijk (2000) has argued that the framing of ethnic minorities has a fundament of ‘new racism’, in which the ‘the other’ is no longer seen as biologically inferior, but still as different from ‘us’. The most frequently covered topics are addressing practical problems caused by migration and refugees and illegal activities, integration conflicts and violence (Van Dijk, 2000).

As mentioned earlier, such events can be picked up by the media as ‘newsworthy’ and generate a temporary increase in the general media coverage of asylum seekers (Georgiou & Zabrowski, 2017). This mechanism could potentially connect refugees to the notion of being a threat to security and economy, as Boomgaarden and Greussing (2017) state, but there are other studies who show a different trend. For instance, according to the study of Nightingale, et al., (2017) the frame that victimizes refugees gains more influence in Western media during the course of the crisis. Furthermore, Greenwood and Thomson (2020) state that the frames not only pose the asylum seekers as an acute threat to society, but rather as a potential burden.

The examples above illustrate the complex and diverging character of the media coverage of the refugee crisis, and show the four general trends media sources tends to follow when framing refugees. The first frame is the ‘normalization’-frame, which describes the refugees as gravitating towards assimilating and integrating into their host country. The second is the ‘victimization’-frame, which represents the displaced as individuals who are innocent and who often suffered a lot in their lives already. The third and fourth frame are respectively ‘burden’ and ‘threat’, which represent the refugees as a possible burden or threat to European societies. Within this context, burden is meant in a more economic or cultural way, while threat

is more associated with notions of security or even terrorism. These frames have already been constructed before by previous studies (Amores, Arcila-Calderón, Blanco-Herrero, 2020; Amores, Arcila-Calderón & Stanek, 2019; Amores, Arcila-Calderón & González-de-Garay, 2020) to study visual framing of multiple European media and will be adapted for this study and applied to textual frames within Dutch internet news. The four connotative frames are thus as follows:

- *normalization*,
- *victimization*,
- *burden*, and
- *threat*.

Among these frames, the two frames that carry a positive connotation are *normalization* and *victimization*, which are estimated to have a positive effect on the attitudes of the host population towards the refugees because they generate feelings of empathy (Parrot et al., 2019). The two frames that are negative are *burden* and *threat*, as they bring about feelings of objectification and dehumanization of refugees (Amores, Arcila-Calderón, Blanco-Herrero, 2020; Stelian, 2014).

## **Hypotheses**

As mentioned earlier, the objective of this study is to provide insight in which way asylum seekers are connotatively depicted by the Dutch internet news coverage during the refugee crisis in Europe. The main goal of this is to identify possible changes in Dutch internet news coverage of refugees over time and what patterns this framing mechanism follows. According to the literature review, first of all, the media coverage of refugees experienced a rapid growth after the start of the migratory crisis, along with an increase of negative attitudes towards refugees and the frequent mention of asylum seekers being a burden or a threat to host societies within Europe (Boomgaarden & Greussing, 2017; Cheng et al., 2014; Vincze, Meza & Balaban, 2021) but also in the Netherlands specifically (van der Woude, 2018). The recent research of Konings and Notten (2021) found that when the main focus of the news media concerns internet news, positive aspects of refugees were mentioned more often than negative aspects of refugees. Nevertheless, the period covered by their research is limited to the first year of the crisis. Georgiou and Zabarowski (2017) found that in the beginning of the crisis media attention towards refugees increased sharply on a temporary basis after the occurrence of ‘key events’ that involved refugees.

Despite the notion that attitudes are more positive towards asylum seekers than to economic immigrants, the representation of refugees within traditional news sources seems to have become less and less compassionate since the beginning of the refugee crisis in Europe (Amores, Arcila-Calderón, Stanek, 2019; Esses et al., 2015). There is thus reason to assume that as the time goes on and refugees continue to enter the country in large numbers, the tone of voice used within the online news will become more negative. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H1: Over the course of the refugee crisis, Dutch internet news uses the *burden-* or *threat* increasingly more frequent than the *normalization-* or *victimization-*frame when presenting refugees or asylum seekers.

Furthermore, media coverage of the migratory crisis seems to be susceptible to depict refugees in a dehumanizing way and react strongly to the so-called key events (Georgiou & Zabarowski, 2017). Refugees are often depicted as passive, either victims or a threat, instead of real actors with feelings and interests of their own (Boomgaard & Greussing, Esses et al., 2008; Esses et al., 2011) and thus often being perceived as the ‘other’ within a society (Cole, 2020; Wyszynski, Guerra & Bierwiazzonek, 2020; Kastoryano, 2002; Pratt, 2005). This effect has also been noticed in the Netherlands prior to the migratory crisis, where media attention towards unauthorized migration was presenting refugees as subject of political debate and ‘issues’ rather than actual humans (Brouwer et al., 2017). This process often makes the mass media coverage sensitive to the occurrence of a key event involving refugees. Internet news is expected to follow this pattern as well or even amplify it, as it tends to be able to respond more quickly to the occurrence of an event than traditional media sources are able to do, thanks to technological developments (Laor & Galily, 2020).

Therefore, it is expected that within the online media coverage of the refugee crisis, the occurrence of a key event involving refugees will immediately increase media attention towards the issue and its nature will determine the category of the frame used to present refugees. In other words, the connotative frame that aligns with the tone of voice of the key event will replace the previous frame as the dominant frame used by the media in the weeks after the event. Thus, the following hypothesis is presented:

H2: When the media attention increases after the occurrence of a key event, the nature of this event will determine which connotative frame (*normalization*, *victimization*, *burden* or *threat*) will be used the most for the following weeks.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This research follows a qualitative design and looks at the effect of adding the elements ‘internet news’ and ‘key events’ to the framing of refugees in Dutch news. To test the hypotheses, I need to uncover the meaning of the text by dividing crucial parts into different thematic categories. I will do this through the conduct of a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) or thematic analysis, which means I will focus on creating codes within the texts (Kuckartz, 2019, p. 183).

The primary data I consulted stems from news articles uploaded between July 2015 and July 2021. These articles have been retrieved from the most used Dutch news website: *NOS.nl*. This platform has specifically been selected for this research, as it belongs to the top of the most used news websites (Appel, 2015; Konings & Notten, 2021). In 2021, the Dutch Online Reach Research (NOBO), based on 5-year data, reported that *NOS.nl* has the most unique visitors, namely more than 8 million (NRC, 2021). Their publications therefore reach a considerable part of the population. Therefore, it is estimated that any possible framing of refugees by this website has a large impact on the public opinion in the Netherlands.

During the first, preparational phase of the analysis, I have searched the online archive of *NOS* for the Dutch translation for articles containing the term ‘refugee’ (*vluchteling*) or ‘asylum seeker’ (*asielzoeker*) within the context of either ‘The Netherlands’ or ‘The EU/ The European Union’. The rationale behind this selection of searching terms lies with limiting the scope of the study to refugee activities in the Netherlands, or EU-level legislative decisions that might have an impact on the Dutch refugee policies. With this selection I have thus excluded the articles that did only cover refugee activities in other European countries than the Netherlands, as this is not the scope of my research. The group of articles that form an exception to this are the articles that cover the overseas hardships that the refugees often have to endure when trying to reach Europe. I decided to include these during the conduct of the analysis, as I discovered that said events often influenced the political and social debate about refugees in the Netherlands profoundly. Konings and Notten (2021) only used data retrieved from the period between 1 April 2016 and 1 March 2017. This research will maximize the coverage of the refugee crisis by covering the entire time span of the course of the refugee crisis since the moment the first refugees had arrived in Europe during the summer of 2015. Therefore, articles published between 1 July 2015 and 1 July 2021 have been consulted. All the original data is written in Dutch, which means that all the quotes collected from the articles are translated in English by myself – all possible errors therefore remain my own.

In the process of data-gathering, I have searched the selected articles for text passages

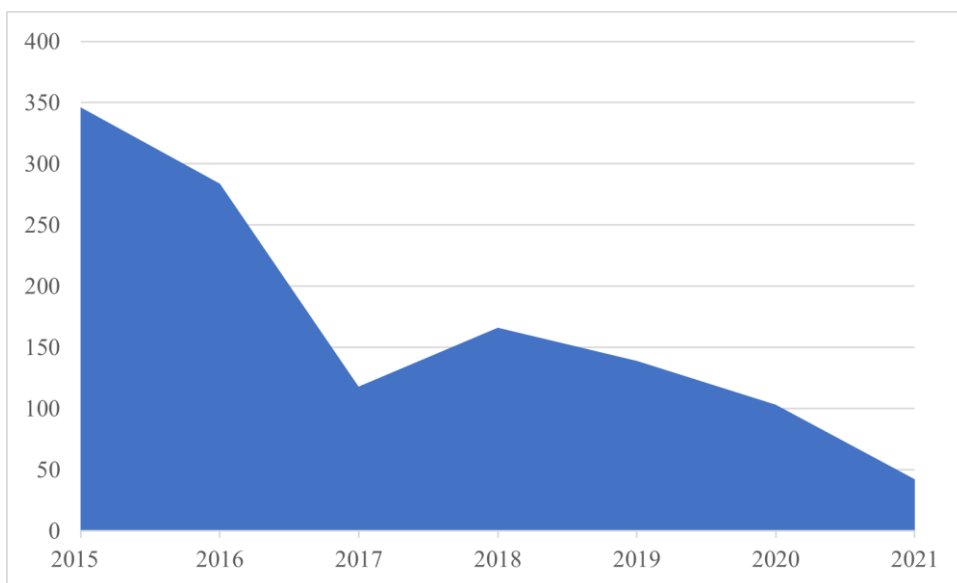
and key words that express a relation with the term ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’. Then, I compiled the texts of these articles into documents that each cover one month. During the QCA, I have pursued the following steps: first, I identified the key words or text passages that expressed a meaning in relation to refugees. An overview of the overview of key words I frequently encountered can be found in Appendix A. Second, I have constructed codes around these key words that each represent a connotation towards refugees (see Appendix B, Appendix C) and labelled the text passages with these codes, using Atlas.ti. Third, I have assigned these codes to thematic subcategories that I formed inductively based on the data (Kuckartz, 2019, pp. 194-195). The last step consisted of filing these subcategories under four main categories, which I have adapted from the framework of Amores, Arcila-Calderón and Stanek (2019).

These four main categories are connotative frames in relation to refugees: normalization (C1), victimization (C2), burden (C3) and threat (C4). After conducting the steps of the QCA, I was able to present the category-based results and interpret the texts systematically and qualitatively. The four connotative main categories can thus be further divided into different frames, which in turn can be divided into different topics concerning text passages. A graphic presentation of the systematic maps of examples of the main categories, subcategories and codes for each connotation can be found in Appendix B.

Simultaneously with distinguishing and dissecting the frames used within the articles, I have investigated the relation between sudden peaks in media attention for refugees and the occurrence of ‘key events’. These key events can be detected by the fact that they triggered an immediate increase in media coverage towards refugees (Georgiou and Zabrowski, 2017). In this part of the analysis, I collected the events that have caused such an increase in attention from the online media and listed them. Then, I examined which connotative frames gained popularity after the occurrence of such an event to assess if there was an observable pattern.

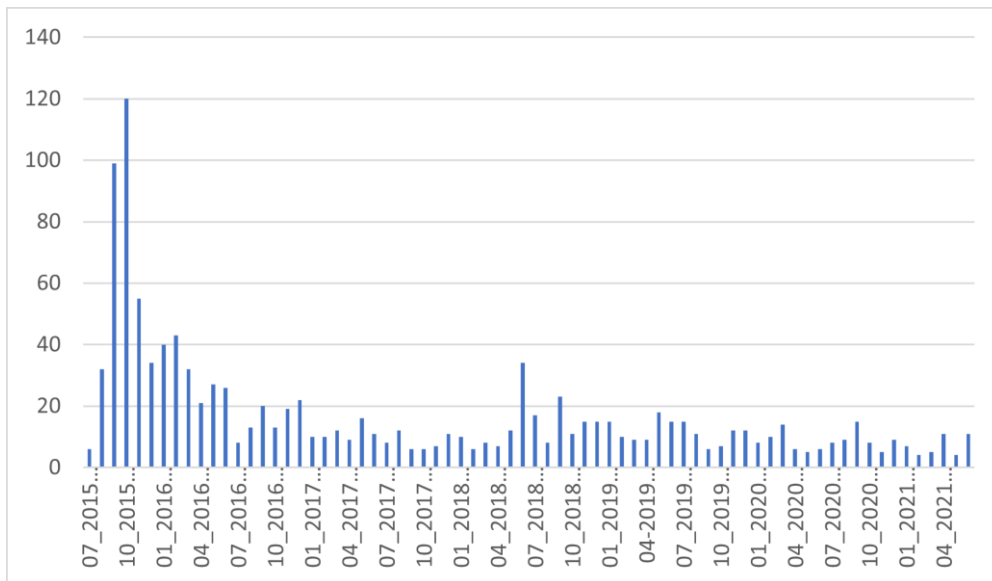
## RESULTS

Figure 1a shows the number of articles on refugees or asylum seekers in the context of the Netherlands or the European Union per annum. This figure is based on the articles that have been uploaded on NOS.nl from the 1 July 2015 and 1 July 2021. With 2017 as an exception, the figure shows a stable trend of decline in online media coverage. The decrease in media attention in 2017 can possibly be explained by the temporary decline in the amount of refugees who arrived in Europe that year. In 2018, there was an unexpected surge in the refugee applications in the Netherlands, leading to a new revival in the amount of articles published on the topic.



**Figure 1a. Number of articles on refugees and asylum seekers per year. July 2015–June 2021.**





**Figure 1b. Number of articles on refugees and asylum seekers per month. 2015-2021.**

Even though Figure 1a shows a more or less stable curve, Figure 1b exposes that the monthly amount of articles published follow a more volatile pattern. After examination of the content of the articles uploaded around these peaks of attention, the sudden increase can be associated with the occurrence of certain events related to refugees or asylum seekers in the Netherlands. Table 1 provides an overview of the events that triggered an increase in the amount of articles per month, as each time such an event occurred – in line with the peaks visible in Figure 1b. The events are listed in chronological order according to month of occurrence and each event is linked to one of the four connotations: normalization, victimization, threat or burden regarding its nature. Furthermore, the table shows which connotative frame became dominant within the majority of the articles published in the time period after the event, determined by which frame has seen the highest increase in amount of codes. This has been calculated by looking at the relative percentual amount of the codes belonging to the four frames as part of the total amount of codes, calculated by the Atlas.ti software. These percentages have been calculated before and after the occurrence of the event, to show a clear distinction. The proven connotative frame that became dominant after the events, has been emphasized in bold. Upon the individual key events will be further elaborated later in this section.

The first observation that stands out is that for all of the key events listed, the nature of the event determined which frame would become most used in the month after its occurrence. For instance, if it is the case that the event involved refugees in a way that they were the victim of a situation, the dominant frame within the news coverage after this event is ‘victimization’.

What is furthermore striking is the strong influence that key events labelled as ‘threat’

have on the framing of refugees in online news. In the majority of the cases, the increase in media attention has been provoked by an event that involved the misconduct of criminal activities of refugees in the Netherlands or Europe. In all of these cases, the connotative frame ‘threat’ became dominant after as well.

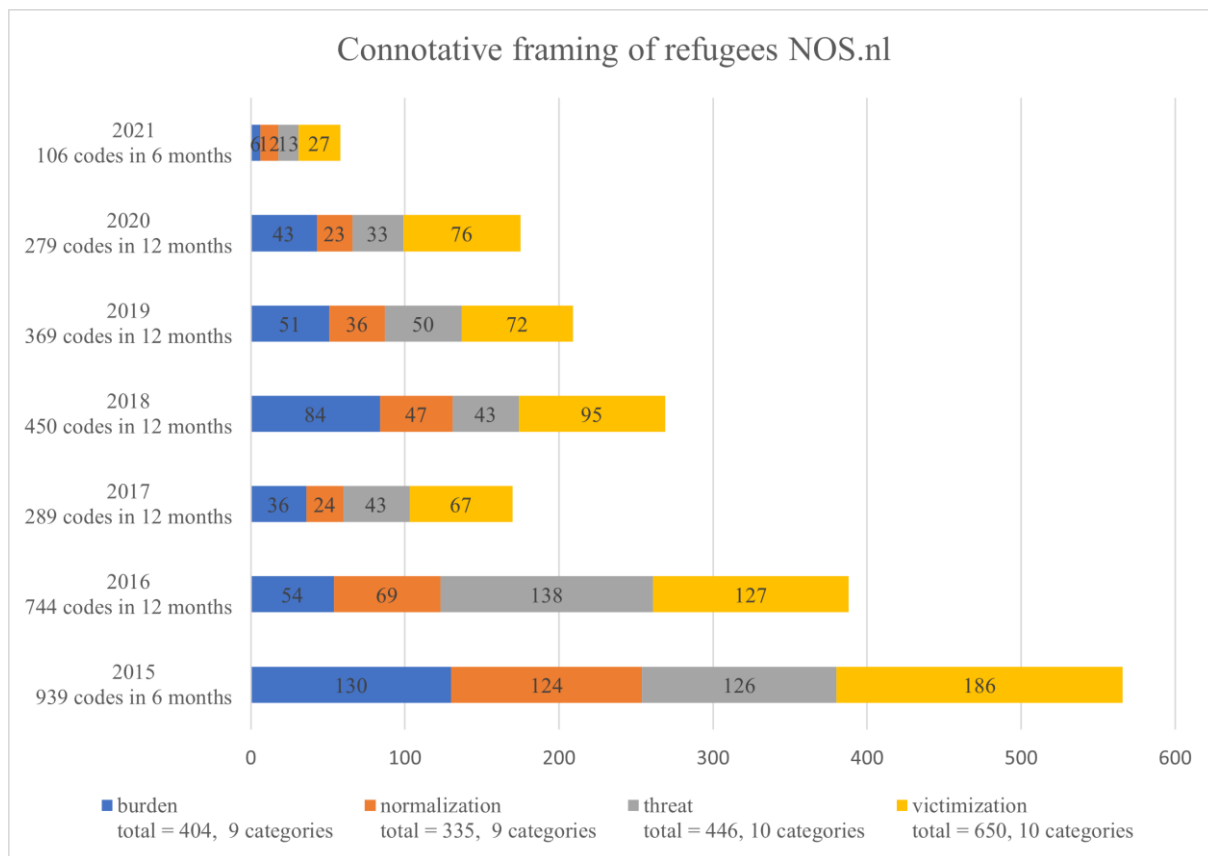
**Table 1. Key events and their subsequent shifts in dominant connotative frame.**

<i>Month of occurrence</i>	<i>Key event</i>	<i>Nature of the event</i>	<i>Subsequent connotative dominant frame</i>		
			08-15 Before	09-15 After	
September 2015	Release picture of Aylan Kurdi	Victimization	burden	26,1%	19,6%
			normalization	8,7%	24,2%
			threat	15,2%	18,8%
			<b>victimization</b>	50,0%	37,5%
November 2015	Terrorist attacks in Paris	Threat	burden	19,6%	13,8%
			normalization	28,9%	24,1%
			<b>threat</b>	25,8%	36,2%
			victimization	25,8%	25,9%
December 2015	Assaults at New Year’s Eve in Cologne	Threat	burden	13,8%	15,9%
			normalization	24,1%	10,2%
			<b>threat</b>	36,2%	52,2%
			victimization	25,9%	21,8%
September 2016	Asylum seekers cause nuisance in Oude Pekela, Groningen	Threat	burden	0,0%	8,8%
			normalization	20,0%	29,4%
			<b>threat</b>	20,0%	35,3%

			victimization	60,0%	26,5%
December 2016	Report COA about unsafe working environment asylums	Threat		11-16 Before	12-16 After
			burden	13,8%	8,0%
			normalization	20,7%	20,0%
			<b>threat</b>	27,6%	68,0%
			victimization	37,9%	4,0%
June 2018	The Aquarius-case	Burden		05-18 Before	06-18 After
			<b>burden</b>	27,8%	42,4%
			normalization	22,2%	7,6%
			threat	33,3%	12,1%
			victimization	16,7%	37,9%
May 2019	Mark Harbers resigns as Secretary of State	Threat		04-19 Before	05-19 After
			burden	9,1%	17,5%
			normalization	27,3%	25,00%
			<b>threat</b>	36,4%	40,0%
			victimization	27,3%	17,5%
August 2020	Moria, the largest Greek migrant camp has been destroyed by fire	Victimization		08-20 Before	09-20 After
			burden	25,0%	31,4%
			normalization	0,00%	14,3%
			threat	16,7%	8,6%
			<b>victimization</b>	58,33%	45,7%
March 2021	Frontex receives new accusation of migrant 'pushbacks' in Greece	Victimization		03-21 Before	04-21 After
			burden	14,3%	7,1%
			normalization	42,9%	21,4%

			threat	14,3%	28,6%
			<b>victimization</b>	28,6%	42,9%

Figure 2 shows the total amount of codes that expressed a connotation towards refugees within internet news articles retrieved from NOS.nl per annum. Important to notice is that the starting point of the graph is on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 2015 as it was around this time that the migratory crisis started to receive media attention in Europe. This applies in a similar way to 2021, where the graph ends at the 1<sup>st</sup> of July. The figure demonstrates that from the four connotative frames, NOS.nl has used the ‘victimization’-frame the most often in total when writing about asylum seekers and refugees. Additionally, ‘victimization’ is also the most popular frame for each year distinctively – the only exception is in 2015, when ‘threat’ was the most popular frame. Apart from that, there are no actual diverging trends between the years in how the connotative frames are distributed or related to each other. Nevertheless, Figure 3a, 3b, 3c and 3d show that the ratios between the codes within each of the frames actually do change over time. The sections below will elaborate upon each of the four frames and evaluate them in the light of the key events as well as their internal distribution of codes. A comprehensive overview of all of the codes and their meanings can be found in the appendices (Appendix C).



**Figure 2. The total amount of codes divided over the four connotative frames. July 2015-2016.**

### **Normalization (C1)**

The codes that can be filed under the connotative frame ‘normalization (C1)’, reflect a positive tone of voice towards refugees. Therefore, articles that frequently mention these codes, generally tend to highlight the portrayed as individual and capable humans who are in no ways different from Dutch citizens. Within news articles, this can be expressed in multiple ways. Covering the personal stories of citizens who identify with refugees, providing historical overviews of earlier refugee stories or offering future integration perspectives regarding refugees are all ways for news writers to ‘normalize’ the refugee as part of the Dutch society. Figure 2 shows that over the course of the years, the ‘normalization’-frame has experienced a decline in popularity. What is further striking is the lack of key events with the nature of this frame or that have generated an increase in the use of this frame. Generally, texts passages that have been labelled with ‘normalization-codes’ have been found in reports about the individual stories of refugees who stayed in Dutch asylums or articles that covered the integration process of refugees who had become status holders. Remarkably, this frame usually gains popularity in

the absence of any key events.

When looking at Figure 3a, it becomes apparent that throughout the years, the relative majority of the texts that belong to the ‘normalization’-frame are coded with ‘humanitarian values’. This concerns texts that are engaged with discourse about the importance of maintaining humanitarian values towards refugees and emphasize the duty humans have to help and support each other. What stands out further is the observation that after 2019, there is a large decrease in codes that are focused on refugee integration: frequency numbers of ‘labour market integration’ as well as ‘community integration’ dropped in the last year and a half of the analysis.

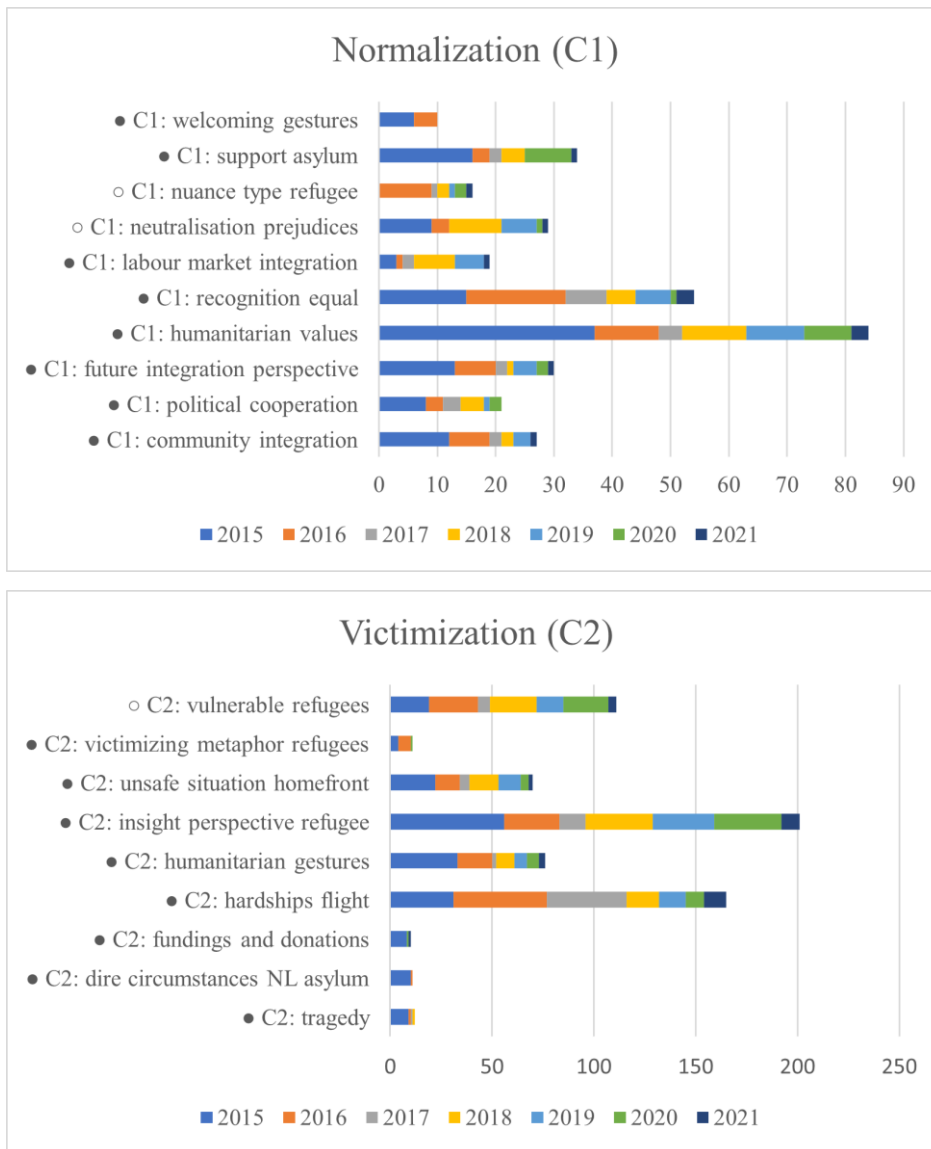
### **Victimization (C2)**

The codes that have been filed under the main category ‘victimization (C2)’ also express a positive tone of voice towards refugees. The rationale behind the choice to include the victimization-category in the group that can be categorized as positive, is that victimization of refugees often leads to feelings of empathy and perhaps sympathy among the reader (Konings and Notten, 2021, p. 585). Furthermore, the results show that the ‘victimization’-frame often provides an insight from the perspective of the refugees themselves, instead of those from politicians or analysts who often tend to describe refugees as one homogenous group. Generally, texts codes with ‘victimization’ describe the hardships and sometimes traumatic experiences refugees had to endure while fleeing to Europe, raise awareness about the unsafe situation in their home countries or emphasize their vulnerable, innocent nature.

First of all, Figure 2 shows that for the whole analysis, the ‘victimization’-frame has been the most popular frame to depict refugees and asylum seekers. Furthermore, the key events that triggered an increase in media attention and that could be linked to victimization caused the victimization-frame to become dominant as well. The first example of such an event is the photo of Aylan Kurdi on that was released in the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2015. On this day, the picture of the 4-year old Syrian boy, who washed ashore the coast of Turkey after he drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to reach Europe, made it to global news. After this event, the amount of articles that covered refugees increased significantly, as Figure 1a and 1b demonstrate. At the same time, the content of the articles experienced a sharp increase in text passages were referring to refugees in a victimizing way. As Table 1 shows, in September 2015, the ‘victimization’-frame was dominant with 37,5% of the amount of codes. Even though this was also the case in the month prior, it is important to notice the vast increase in online media attention after the release of the picture of Aylan.

The two key events that triggered a less spectacular, but still noteworthy increase in media attention can be found in the last two years of the analysed time period. The first one refers to the fire in the night of 8 to 9 September 2020 that burned down Moria, the largest refugee camp in Europe (NOS, 2020). The second one concerns the accusations of witnesses who saw Greece coast guards secretly expelling boat migrants of European shores, later known as the performance of refugee-‘pushbacks’(NOS, 2021). This event became a very sensitive issue on European level as these pushbacks were brought into relation with Frontex, the official border management agency of European Union. In both cases, the ‘victimization’-frame was the most popular frame in use in the weeks after the events, with 45,7% of the codes in September 2020 and 42,9% of the codes in April 2021.

Finally, Figure 3b shows that the victimization of refugees mainly takes place through providing insight in their situation, stressing their vulnerability or mentioning the hazards of their flight to Europe. Especially the latter, the ‘hardships flight’-code, has been consistently present throughout the years which caused to increase the amount of ‘victimization’-codes profoundly. This can possibly be explained by the high amount of online news articles containing short announcements that several refugees died in shipwrecks trying to reach Europe.



**Figure 3a, Figure 3b. Distribution codes per connotative frame (C1 + C2).**

### **Burden (C3)**

The codes that can be filed under the main category ‘burden (C3)’ express a negative tone of voice towards refugees and mainly highlight the connotation of refugees being a burden to the Dutch society. This often happens by raising connotations of the financial costs and political tension the arrival of refugees in Europe and the Netherlands has brought about. Metaphors such as ‘never ending problem’ are often used here to describe the refugees. For the reader, this connotative frame reduces refugees to an expensive issue or political problem rather than a group of actual human individuals. Most articles that frame the refugees as a burden, refer to statistics or to ‘the refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’ as a large, anonymous and homogenous group.



The only event that generated a considerable increase in media attention and that involved refugees as a burden, was the case of the rescue ship called ‘Aquarius’ (see Table 1). This ship reported on 11 June 2018 that they were refused by the Italian government in attempt to dock on Italian shores after rescuing more 600 migrants out of the Mediterranean Sea. It would eventually take days before the EU have decided how to distribute the refugees on board, involving the refugees in a dragging political conflict. In the weeks after this event, the amount of ‘burden’-codes found within news articles on refugees increased significantly, leading to ‘burden’ becoming the dominant frame (42,4%, Table 1) used to depict refugees.

Figure 3c shows a few noteworthy observations. First, when comparing ‘distribution NL’ to ‘distribution EU’, it becomes clear that while the distribution of refugees in asylums was a mainly domestic issue in the first years of the crisis, the ‘refugee-problem’ shifted slowly to the European political playing field. From 2018 and on, NOS.nl was focused more on the political issues within the European Union than in the Netherlands itself. Another interesting observation is the sudden rise of the term ‘economic refugee’ in 2017, implying that a part of the asylum seekers who came to Europe did not flee from their unsafe home situation, but instead had economic interests.

#### **Threat (C4)**

The codes that can be filed under the main category ‘threat (C4)’ mainly depict refugees as a threat to the Dutch society in either a symbolic or realistic way. In symbolic terms, they express a negative tone of voice towards refugees. They do this with the use of securitizing metaphors; in this case, articles often use words similar to ‘flood’ or ‘explosive’ when describing refugee flows, or replace the word ‘refugee’ with ‘illegal’. In more concrete cases, text passages brought refugees into relation with terrorism or criminal activities – indicating the safety of Dutch citizens might be jeopardized by the refugees’ arrival. This connotation of refugees being a threat can also be expanded to the cultural domain, where refugees are depicted as an anonymous group that aims to take over Dutch culture or religion in a hostile way – notions that often culminate into Islamophobic remarks and utterances.

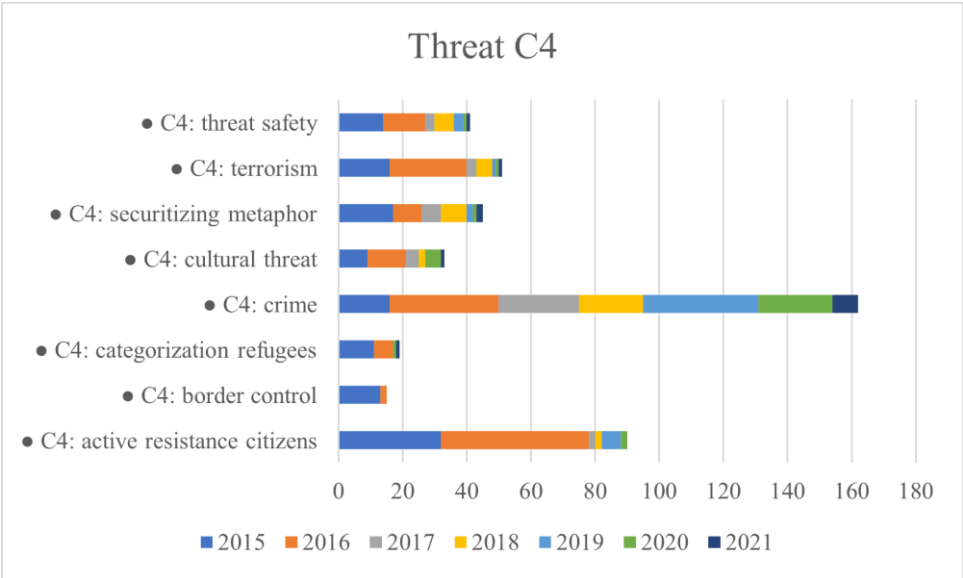
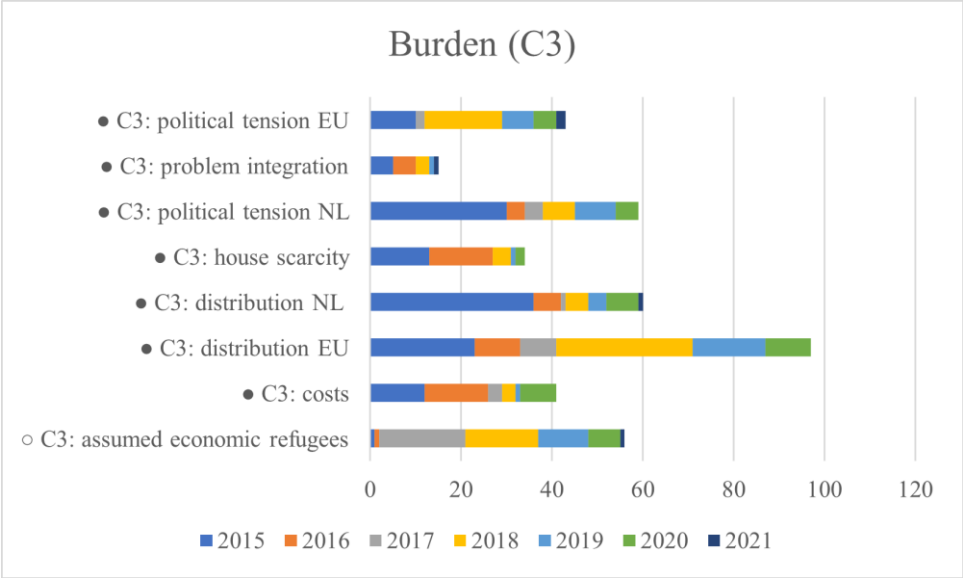
Figure 2 shows that ‘threat’ is the second most popular connotative frame used when writing about refugees. What stands out is the high amount of key events related to refugees being a threat that triggered an increase in media attention (see Figure 1b and Table 1). These events concern either terrorist attacks in Europe or the misconduct of a small group of asylum seekers in the Netherlands and influenced the online news coverage trends greatly.

The first two key events involve incidents that took place in European context, but still

managed to affect the Dutch debate on refugees due to their scale and impact. The terrorist attacks on the night of 13 November 2015 in Paris immediately raised concerns about the safety threat of letting refugees enter Europe, despite the lack of evidence that any refugees were directly involved in the executing these attacks. These concerns are reflected in the Dutch online media, as the ‘threat’-frame could be connected to 36,2% of the codes in the month after the attacks. This trend exacerbated after hundreds of women reported that they experienced harassment and assault on New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne caused by groups of young men with asylum seekers among them (NOS, 2016). In the month following this event, ‘threat’ remained the dominant connotative frame by covering 52,2% of the total amount of codes.

The other two key events that concern the threat of refugees took place in the domestic political field of the Netherlands and involved criminal activities of asylum seekers. First, on 11 December 2016, the managing board of the Central Body on Asylum Seekers (COA) wrote an emergency letter on the complaints of the asylum staff who felt unsafe during work (NOS, 2016). This generated a high amount of articles covering the nuisance caused by asylum seekers in several asylums across the Netherlands; during December the amount of codes labelled with ‘threat’ went up to 68,0% of the total amount. Years later, on 21 May 2019, a similar situation occurred after Mark Harbers stepped down as the Secretary of State due to accusation of having ‘smuggled away’ criminal rates of asylum seekers (NOS, 2019). Again, during that month, NOS.nl started to report extensively on cases that involved the misconduct of refugees in asylums, ending up in 40,0% of the codes used to depict refugees being related to the ‘threat’-frame.

Figure 3d shows that the articles uploaded on NOS.nl that used the ‘threat’-frame in relation to refugees are mainly concerned with their criminal activities. Next to this, the texts that have been labelled with ‘cultural threat’ are far less present, meaning there is not as much attention for issues such as cultural or religious differences between Dutch citizens and refugees.



**Figure 3c and 3d. Distribution per connotative frame (C3 + C4)**

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has investigated the mechanisms behind the internet news portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands, using a qualitative content analysis (QCA). It has looked at the developments regarding the ways refugees have been framed through the course of the crisis, and determined which events have influenced the choice of these frames. After dissecting the news coverage into four main connotative categories and comparing their relation with the occurrence of certain key events, it can be established that on the long term, Dutch online news tends to mainly victimize refugees but still remains sensitive to the newsworthiness of the misconduct of refugees.

In answer to the research question, the following can be concluded: firstly, Dutch internet news has predominantly used the 'victimization'-frame when writing about refugees and asylum seekers. Even on the long term, the online news coverage still has the tendency to depict refugees as victims, confirming the tendency predicted by Nightingale et al., (2017) that victimization of refugees will remain significant during the course of the refugee crisis. Therefore, the first hypothesis (H1) needs to be rejected. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the victimization of refugees has proven to be less based on personal stories than previously expected – in the majority of the cases, the refugees remained an anonymous and homogenous group, even when they were depicted as victims. In addition to that, the 'normalization'-frame comes last place in how frequently it has been used – 'threat' and 'burden' are both profoundly more popular. These findings are partly in line with those of Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017), who stated that refugees are mainly depicted as an anonymous, dehumanized outgroup of passive victims or a threat to the security of the host state. However, the stance that refugees are also framed often as a cultural threat to the host society does not apply for this research, as the majority of the 'threat'-frame is merely concerned with the criminal activities of asylum seekers. On top of this, important to mention is the rise of the term 'economic refugee' in the later years of the analyzed period, as well as the frequently appearing clarifications that the asylum seekers who caused nuisance were coming from 'safe countries'. During the conduct of the analysis, it was at times hard to discern a distinction of between those 'economic' refugees and 'real' refugees when both categories are under the same umbrella term of 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker'. Future framing research on refugees could be helpful in making a more clear conceptual distinction between the two by using multiple news sources. This analysis method was focussed more on detecting changes over time by using one source extensively, but this decision has made it more difficult to recognize differences in meanings of words immediately.

Secondly, internet news indeed turns out to be susceptible for the occurrence of large, news-worthy events and these events have impacted the framing of refugees greatly. Therefore, the second hypothesis (H2) turns out to be true. Especially when the asylum seekers seem to pose a threat, these event received a large amount of media-attention and this resulted in a spill-over of the ‘threat’-frame in other articles about refugees as well. This observation seems to confirm the findings of Brouwer et al., (2017) stating that media attention for refugees still tends to be concentrated about political controversies and the notion that refugees receive the most attention when they are misbehaving. Nevertheless, there were also large peaks of attention around events that victimized refugees, such as the fire that destroyed camp Moria. This is actually different from the Dutch traditional media representation of refugees in the years before the refugee crisis, as there used to be minimal attention for the occurrence of such events. Internet news seems to be more sensitive to different forms of newsworthiness instead of exclusively portraying refugees as a threat, which is in line with the findings Laor and Galily (2020) on the nature of internet news and maximizes the results of Konings and Notten (2021), who already had foreseen a careful trend towards a more positive online representation of refugees.

Ultimately, it becomes apparent that the Dutch online news media does not pay a large amount of attention to the ongoing integration process of refugees. The ‘normalization’-frame does not increase in influence over the course of the years, despite the steadily growing amount of asylum applications in the Netherlands. The risk of news media influencing the attitudes of the Dutch host society negatively is therefore present, but could this observation could be enforced by adding a larger variety of online news sources to the analysis or even interview Dutch citizens and refugees – an option this research could not carry out due to time constraints. This thesis has provided a framework that invites future research to engage deeper in the connotative frames provided and take their influence on host societies’ attitudes into consideration, as despite the decreasing amount of newsworthiness, the migratory crisis the world currently faces seems to be nowhere near closure yet.

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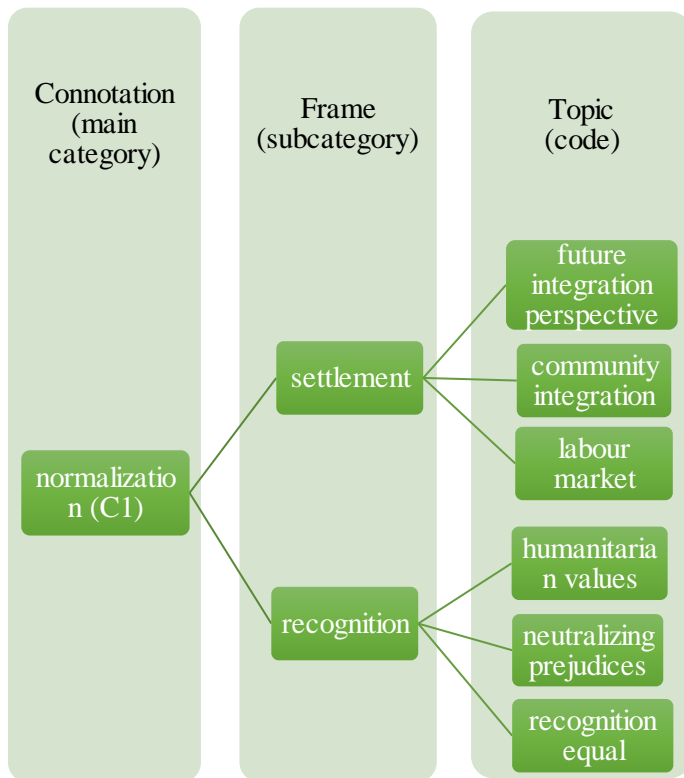
Wyszynski, M. C., Guerra, R., Bierwaczonck, K. H. (2020). Good refugees, bad migrants? Intergroup helping orientations towards refugees, migrants, and economic migrants in Germany. *Journal of applied social psychology*, 50(10), 607-618.

## APPENDIX

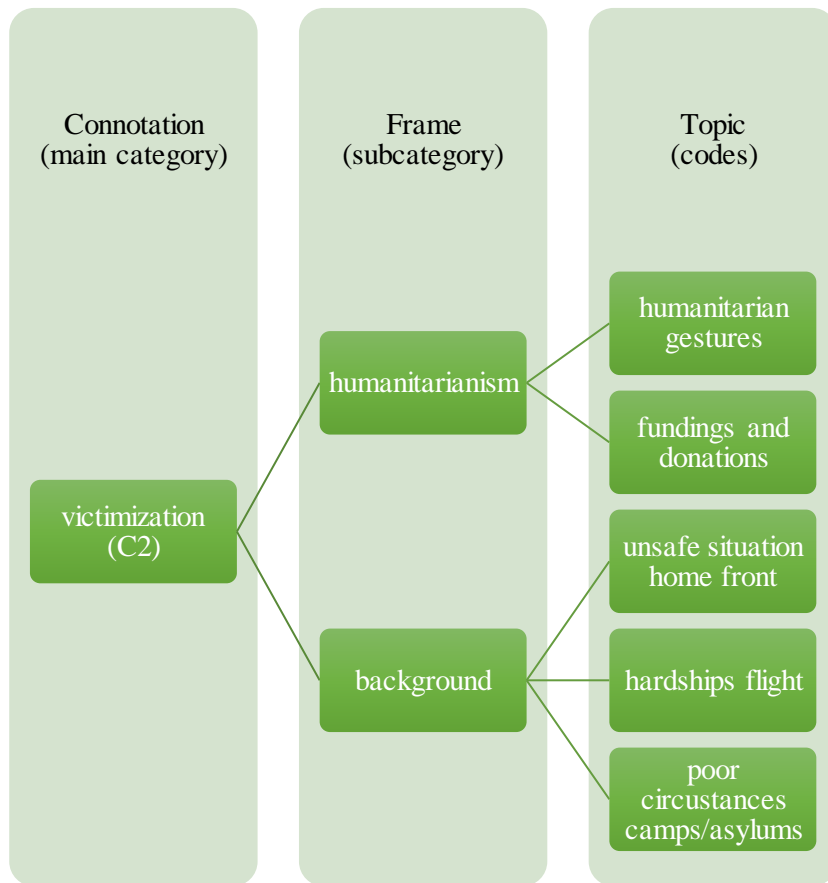
### Appendix A. Overview of key words

<u>Normalization</u> <u>(C1)</u>	<u>Victimization</u> <u>(C2)</u>	<u>Burden</u> <u>(C3)</u>	<u>Threat</u> <u>(C4)</u>
contact	victim(s)	problem	terrorist(s)
understanding	donation(s)	costs	unsafe
future	fund(s)	shortage	attack
cooperation	help	distribution	border control
duty	volunteer(s)	house market	flood
invite	humanitarian	tension	explosive
integration	casualties	sore point	jihad
society	sunken	issue	resistance
school	war	displace	danger
job	lost everything	pressure	uncivilized
example	hope	fortune seeker(s)	crime
new life	survive	economic	foreign
forward	willing	safe country	illegal
same	washed ashore		deport
	shock		nuisance
	flight		

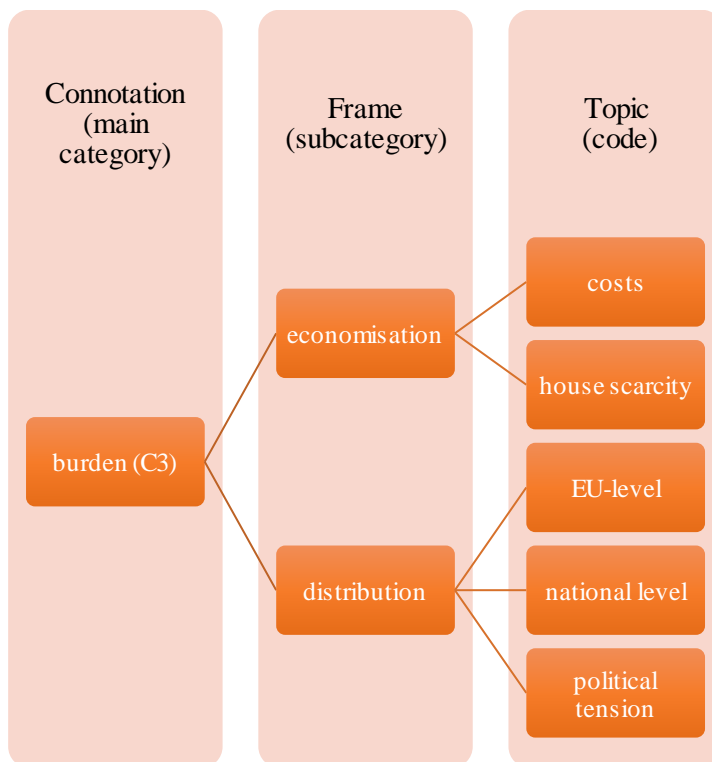
**Appendix B. Examples of the foundation of text coding scheme for the connotative frames.**



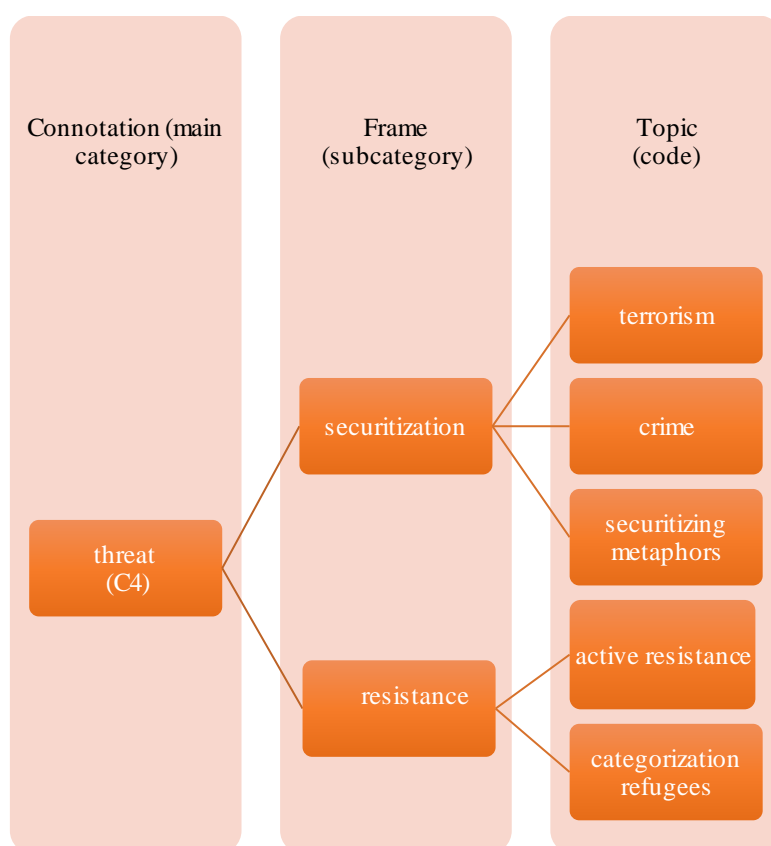
**Figure B1. normalization (C1).**



**Figure B2. victimization (C2).**



**Figure B3. burden (C3).**



**Figure B4. threat (C4).**

### Appendix C. Complete overview of codes and their descriptive meanings

Code	Connotative frame	Description
C1: community integration	normalization	Mention of refugees successfully interacting with/integrating within host community
C1: EU-level cooperation	normalization	Mention of refugees in relation to successful European policy/ cooperation
C1: future integration perspective	normalization	Mention of assumed future integration prospect of refugees into their host society
C1: humanitarian values	normalization	Mention of humanitarian values that emphasize the value of supporting refugees and duties towards them
C1: labour market integration	normalization	Mention of refugees in relation to their successful integration in the labour market of the host society



C1: differentiation refugees	normalization	Mention of different types of refugees, instead of filing them all under the same category
C1: neutralization prejudices	normalization	Mention of neutralizing prejudices about refugees by disproving them
C1: recognition refugee as equal	normalization	Mention of recognition refugee as an individual equal to host society members
C1: support asylum	normalization	Mention of host society members expressing supportive discourse for providing refugees asylum
C1: welcoming gestures NL	normalization	Mention of host society members actively welcoming newly arrived in their community
C2: tragedy	victimization	Mention of the situation of refugees being a tragedy
C2: dire circumstances asylum NL	victimization	Mention of the dire circumstances refugees encounter during their stay in asylums
C2: fundings and donations	victimization	Mention of fundings of donations that have been collected for the purpose of supporting refugees
C2: hardships flight	victimization	Mention of the hardships, such as shipwrecks and casualties, that refugees encountered during their attempt to reach Europe
C2: humanitarian gestures	victimization	Mention of the efforts of volunteers and institutions that support refugees
C2: insight perspective refugees	victimization	Mention of the experiences of refugees from their own perspectives
C2: unsafe situation home front	victimization	Mention of the unsafe situation in the home country of the refugees/ why this caused them to seek asylum
C2: victimizing metaphor refugees	victimization	Mention of victimizing metaphors that describe refugees
C2: vulnerable refugees	victimization	Mention of refugees that are specifically vulnerable/innocent, such as children or injured
C3: assumed rationality	burden	Mention of interests of refugees to come to Europe being rational and economic-driven beforehand

C3: costs	burden	Mention of the costs that the host society has to incur to provide asylum
C3: distribution EU	burden	Mention of the complications on EU decision-making level to distribute refugees among the member states
C3: distribution NL	burden	Mention of the complications within the Dutch political system to distribute refugees among the states
C3: political tension NL	burden	Mention of political tension/ arguments as a result of the arrival of refugees
C3: problem integration	burden	Mention of integration policy complications in relation to refugees
C3: tension EU	burden	Mention of EU-level political tension/ arguments as a result of the refugee crisis
C4: active resistance citizens	threat	Mention of host society members protesting/ expressing violence or hate speech against refugees
C4: border control	threat	Mention of border control regulations against the threat of refugees
C4: categorization refugees	threat	Mention of the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' refugees
C4: crime	threat	Mention of refugees in relation to criminal activities or nuisance
C4: cultural threat	threat	Mention of refugees posing a threat to host society's cultural civilization and values
C4: securitizing metaphor	threat	Mention of refugees while using a securitizing metaphor, such as 'illegal' or 'flood'
C4: terrorism	threat	Mention of refugees posing a terrorist threat to the host society
C4: threat safety	threat	Mention of refugees posing a direct, physical threat to host society members