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VISUALLY FRAMING GENOCIDE

The present study looks at the visual framing of the Rohingya crisis using mixed-methods, and in doing so attempts to fill a gap in framing literature by focusing on genocide, which has been widely understudied in framing studies. While the situation on the ground is that of genocide (Khin, 2017), visuals presented in mass media tend to portray it as a refugee crisis. Given the tendency of images tend to be remembered better than words, especially when the two are in conflict (Grabe & Bucy, 2009), the main message being communicated to the world about the Rohingyas is that they are mostly deciding to live somewhere else rather than being systematically decimated and forced off their land. Thus, how the Rohingya crisis is visually portrayed is highly consequential for shaping public opinion about the Myanmar situation.

News images that appeared on Reuters's, Al Jazeera's websites were collected from June 06, 2012, to August 20, 2020. Because of the lack of images relating to genocide from Reuters and Al Jazeera, the authors decided to include images from international photography contests. Because of the number of images published in eight years, 30 days were picked at random to have the equivalent of a month of data. During these 30 days, 364 images were published – 211 from Reuters, 54 from Al Jazeera, 99 from international photography contests. The authors then developed an inventory of visual frames used in news coverage about the crisis and found six distinct frames: Immigration (by choice), humanitarian crisis, genocide, law and order, othering, and politics. A validation study was conducted to find images that best represent each frame for the next stage of this study.

During the next stage of the study, new participants were shown three images of a frame and asked to describe their thoughts, feelings, and inferences about the images. It is important to note that participants were not aware of the frame, so that their inferences were not prompted. Later, participants were asked how well they think each frame relates to genocide, and what kinds of genocide images they would be willing to see in the news. The process was repeated for four different frames. Beyond the quantitative data, and the differences in results based on gender, knowledge of the crisis, religion, age, comfort in seeing such images, and intentions to donate, five main themes emerged from the participants' open-ended answers: 1) participants described how they felt rather than what they saw in terms of either negative (16.46%) or positive (6.31%) feelings; 2) participants also referred back to cultural scripts when interpreting images; 3) images of children in

need cause people to feel more empathy (9.8%) or even generate mixed feelings and coactivation (1.66%); 4) non-graphic images in the context of genocide generated confusion; and, 5) neutral descriptions (43.79%) were generated in response to all frames. To a lesser extent, participants also tried to make sense of the new images based on previous frames they had just seen through intertextuality.

(Dr. Erik Bucy is second author)

BIO:

Julie Grandjean is a PhD candidate and part-time instructor in the College of Media and Communication at Texas Tech University. She holds a MA in multilingual communication and international relations from the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium. Julie studies political and cultural ramifications of visuals in various contexts such as wars, refugee crises, political unrests, and national and international events through theories and perspectives of rhetorical criticism, and civil religion.