

Understanding the Images of Alan Kurdi With “Small Data”: A Qualitative, Comparative Analysis of Tweets About Refugees in Turkey and Flanders (Belgium)

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One of the peak moments of the debate on the European refugee crisis was caused by the circulation of images of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in the Aegean Sea on September 2, 2015. The images triggered worldwide reactions from politicians, nongovernmental organizations, and citizens. This article analyzes these reactions through a qualitative study of 961 tweets from Turkey and Flanders (Belgium), contextualizing them into the framing and representation of refugees before and after the images were released. Our study finds that, despite their iconic qualities and potential to mobilize Twitter users around refugee issues, the images did not cause a major shift in common discourses and representations. Instead, references to Kurdi were incorporated into preexisting discourses on and representations of refugees, thus offering different actors in the public debate on refugees with new symbols and motifs to construct meaning.

Keywords: Twitter, social media, refugees, Alan Kurdi, qualitative content analysis, Turkey, Belgium, Flanders

The so-called European refugee crisis refers to the notable rise in the number of refugees and migrants coming to the European Union (EU) since 2015 to seek asylum. Although they constitute a diverse population, many of the refugees originate from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Eurostat (2016) states that, in 2015, more than 1.2 million first-time asylum seekers were registered in the EU, more than the double the number in 2014. Coinciding with an ongoing EU polity crisis, the influx of refugees caused highly mediatized public debates. Some pivotal points in these debates were the sinking of five boats in the Mediterranean Sea, causing the death of an estimated 1,200 people in April 2015; Hungary’s construction of a barrier at its Serbian and Croatian borders; and the circulation of photographs of Alan

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Kurdi,² a three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned near the Turkish coast in September 2015 (see Figure 1). This article examines the latter event and explores how images of the boy were embedded in the discourses on the social media service Twitter. Our analysis focuses on Turkey and Flanders (Belgium) between June 2015 and July 2016.



Figure 1. Alan Kurdi, photographed by Nilüfer Demir, September 2, 2015.

Since the circulation of the photographs of Kurdi's washed-ashore body, taken by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir, their transformative power and iconic potential have been emphasized by many (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; De Andrés, Nos Aldás, & García Matilla, 2016; Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2016; Ibrahim & Howarth, 2016; Mortensen, 2017). The images, made and released on September 2, 2015, made global headlines, circulating massively across media platforms. A report by the Visual Social Media Lab (Vis & Goriunova, 2015) based on a study conducted in the days after the release of the photographs states that the images circulated to the screens of almost 20 million people around the world within 12 hours, reaching more than 30,000 tweets (Vis & Goriunova, 2015, p. 10). Analyses reveal that the images generated a massive increase in tweets about migration and refugees, spreading across the globe via the Middle East (D'Orazio, 2015). Based on Google search data, Rodgers (2015) demonstrates that, as the images went viral, they shifted popular interest in the topic of immigration and refugees, leading to a changing agenda. Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017), moreover, find that, following Kurdi's death, there was an increase in humanitarian and more personalized reporting on refugees in newspapers.

The photographs of Kurdi have been described as "iconic," comparable to photographs of children in times of humanitarian crises, such as Nick Ut's 1973 photograph of Phan Thi Kim Phúc taken during a napalm attack in the Vietnam War or Kevin Carter's 1993 photograph of a starving Sudanese child stalked by a vulture. Scholars have also noted the impact of the images—for instance, on the Canadian elections (Carlier, 2016) and on mobilization among citizens (Koca, 2016; Vis, 2016). The scholarly attention on the

² The name Aylan Kurdi also circulates widely, supposedly after Turkish authorities misspelled his name.

images should be understood within the broader expansion of literature on photography and public culture, driven by the work of authors such as Hariman and Lucaites (2016).

While recognizing the iconic qualities and the viral, global circulation of the images, we seek to investigate them from the empirical viewpoint of national contexts. By approaching the phenomenon through "small data," we reveal the variety of responses to and appropriations of the images on Twitter. Moreover, we put the often-assumed impact of the "icon" into perspective by contextualizing it within distinct political contexts. We argue that, despite their iconic qualities, the images of Kurdi did not cause a shift in discourses on refugees; rather, they were incorporated into preexisting discourses. The study also exposes national, social, and political contexts that further demythologize the global impact of the iconic images.

Social Media, Twitter, and Images

Social media create diverse communication spaces in which users can debate social issues among "networked audiences" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 122). Thus, social media, especially Twitter, which has evolved from "a medium for small-talk" based on personal updates (Rogers, 2014, p. xiv) to a medium for news sharing and "event-following" (Rogers, 2014, p. xvi), became key sources for studying how various social issues are perceived.

The various users of Twitter "all participate in a shared media technology with particular functionalities and communicative architecture" (Schmidt, 2013, p. 3). This shared communicative space is shaped not only by technological affordances but social textual relationships and shared rules and expectations. Bruns and Moe (2014, p. 16) suggest a threefold conceptual model for understanding this communication space, including the microlevel of interpersonal communication between Twitter users; the mesolevel of follower-followee networks, and the macrolevel of hashtag-based exchanges. This three-layered communication space enables Twitter to be used for different communicative purposes (Bruns & Moe, 2014, p. 15). The spontaneity of communication at the macrolevel gives Twitter users flexibility for creating "ad hoc publics" around certain topics. These various levels of "public-ness" are arguably what makes Twitter so attractive for researchers (Bruns & Moe, 2014, p. 20). It is Twitter's potential to create ad hoc publics that attracts our attention to this platform for understanding the social impacts of the images of Kurdi, which reverberated at the international scale on Twitter and other social media (Vis & Goriunova, 2015).

Images on social media, including Twitter, receive increased attention, partly due to the prominence of visual forms that are tightly connected to social media, such as selfies (Adami & Jewitt, 2016). Twitter made direct preview of pictures in the time line possible in 2014. The significance of images on social media becomes particularly evident in times of crisis, as Vis, Faulkner, Parry, Manyukhina, and Evans (2013) note:

Crisis events like natural disasters and civil disobedience can be intensely visual, and it is often through images that we come to know and remember them. . . . With the popularization of digital cameras in combination with the development of social media,

large amounts of user-generated imagery is typically produced in response to crisis events and circulated within wider media ecologies. (p. 386)

More recently, Bruns and Hanusch (2017) have also noted Twitter's affordances that make affective audiovisual content circulate during crisis events. While the images of Kurdi were made by a professional journalist, their remediations and digital reverberations (Mortensen, 2017) constitute a rich visual realm for a study in the context of Twitter. Our aim is not to study these images in isolation, but rather to position them within representations of and discourses on refugees more broadly.

Representations of Refugees

Media representations not only "reflect the events that are happening and views that are already 'out there'" but actively contribute to the construction of the meaning of the events (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015, p. 13). Therefore, the representation of refugees constitutes an important subject in media studies.³ Previous research has especially focused on the representation of immigrants in the press and on television and on issues such as framing patterns, bias, and stereotyping (Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, & Nicholson, 2013; Caviedes, 2015; KhosraviNik, 2010; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017; Yaylaci & Karakus, 2015).

News reporting about refugees often tends to be framed negatively, as a problem rather than a benefit to hosting societies (Berry et al., 2015, p. 5; Elsamni, 2016, p. 8; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013, p. 522). Of course, this does not mean that there is a single mode of depiction in the representation of refugees; rather, there are "multiple viable narratives" that interweave with one another (Caviedes, 2015, p. 912). Various studies demonstrate common frames in the news portrayals of immigrants and refugees in different contexts. These can be clustered as the danger/securitization/control framework, referring to portrayals as security threats and calling for policies of securitization; the economy/social costs framework, discussing the economic harms and utilities refugees bring along; the culture/integration framework focusing on cultural issues and integration policies; and the humanitarian framework, considering migration in the framework of human rights. As revealed in various studies, the most typical representation of refugees within these frames is that of threat or victimhood (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015, p. 795; Horsti, 2013, p. 79). Earlier studies have found that Syrian refugees are often portrayed in news reporting as victims, burdens, or threats (Elsamni, 2016, p. 8; Erdogan, 2015, p. 149; Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016, p. 179; Yaylaci & Karakus, 2015, p. 247). The way in which refugees are portrayed links to the broader discussion of the ethics of visibility of vulnerable others, as Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) remind us.

In addition to these commonly shared frameworks, collectivization—meaning that refugees and immigrants are often constructed as a unanimous group with shared characteristics, backgrounds, intentions, motivations, and statuses—appears as a common strategy that is used for the negative or

³ The studies cited in this section mainly focus on representations of refugees, although in some studies *asylum seekers* or *migrants* is used as a more appropriate term. It is important to consider the specific national and historical contexts of the empirical studies mentioned here.

positive portrayal of refugees in news media (KhosraviNik, 2010, p. 12). For example, refugees can be collectively represented as victims, "humanizing" their situation (KhosraviNik, 2010, p. 17), or as collective threats, "dehumanizing" them (Bleiker et al., 2013; Esses et al., 2013, p. 524). Individual representations of immigrants, on the other hand, can offer a more humanitarian framework aiming to create empathy, but they can also be used for negative framing (KhosraviNik, 2010, pp. 15, 19). These patterns have a long history, as described in Mannik's (2012) study of historical photographs of refugees.

Although studies on the representation of refugees predominantly focus on mass media, an increasing number of studies on social media are seen as actively contributing to the construction of meanings of the refugee flows (Mortensen, 2017; Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016; Yıldırım & Yurtdaş, 2016). While some claim that social media offer a space for alternative discourses to mainstream mass media, others, such as Rettberg and Gajjala (2016, p. 179), argue that frames in social media users' posts also contribute to the distribution of stereotypical discourses and are not always divergent from those of the news media (Yıldırım & Yurtdaş, 2016).

We argue that, despite growing interest in the role of social media in shaping public discourse about refugees, there is still a lack of empirical research, in particular qualitative and comparative studies. Although some previous studies have examined Turkey or Flanders as case studies (De Cleen, Zienkowski, Smets, Dekie, & Vandevordt, 2017; Van Gorp, 2005, Yıldırım & Yurtdaş, 2016), ours originally combines both regions and delves into representations on social media over a longer period. Moreover, while many studies analyze either textual or visual representations, the current study recognizes the synergies between textual and visual representations in a social medium such as Twitter.

Methods and Research Design

Research Focus and Case Studies

The main research questions of this study are:

RQ1: How are refugees represented by Twitter users in Flanders and Turkey?

RQ2: How is the refugee issue, as a phenomenon, framed, understood, and explained by Twitter users in Flanders and Turkey?

RQ3: What is the role of the images of Alan Kurdi in the representations of refugees and the refugee issue on Twitter?

Flanders and Turkey constitute the two case studies for the comparative analysis, one representing a neighboring country of Syria and one a more distant West European region.⁴ Since the

⁴ Flanders is the largely Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium. It enjoys considerable political autonomy. The reasons for focusing on Flanders in particular rather than on Belgium are twofold. It allows us to include tweets in only one language (Dutch) rather than three (Belgium has three official languages:

beginning of the civil war, Turkey has received the highest number of Syrian refugees, currently about 2.8 million people (Turkish Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, 2016). Although, in comparison, Flanders has not received such high numbers, the influx of Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghan refugees has been debated widely in the public sphere due Belgium's role in the EU (its capital, Brussels, hosting many of the EU's institutions), its history with migration and multiculturalism, and the traditionally vocal right-wing political parties (see De Cleen et al., 2017).⁵ The comparison enables us to not only understand the shared international dynamics of the refugee issue but focus on the local/national dynamics that shape the perception of the issue at the microlevel.

Toward a Qualitative Study of Tweets

We focus on Twitter because it has become an important platform for public debate, creating ad hoc publics around specific social issues and understanding the resonance of key issues in the society as discussed earlier. Given the amounts of data that can be scraped from Twitter and the possibilities of automated analysis, Twitter is very attractive for big data analysis. In fact, most research on Twitter adopts a quantitative design (Marwick, 2014, p. 110). Although often presented as if it makes research more complete, objective, and accurate, big data analysis also has its limitations (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 667; Busch, 2014). Having large amounts of data does not disburden researchers from methodological challenges in sampling strategies (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 670) or from ethical responsibilities vis-à-vis marginalized subjects (Leurs & Shepherd, 2017). Despite the growing interest in big data, many emphasize the continued importance of "small data." Depending on the research question, a closer analysis of a limited number of cases can provide information that cannot be gained by the study of millions of cases (boyd & Crawford, 2012). Such analysis can enable us to go beyond the "well-behaved confines of macro-layer hashtag studies," which provides a challenge for quantitative analysis (Bruns & Moe, 2014, p. 25), to understand the contexts in which the communication takes place (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 671; Marwick, 2014, p. 110), to focus on a particular user group and understand the relations between them (Marwick, 2014, p. 110), and to look more closely at the connections between the macro- and mesolevels of communication on Twitter. Moreover, as Boellstorff (2013) argues, "we cannot cede more generalized theorizing to only some disciplines and methodological approaches" (para. 55)—that is, those working with big data.

Few guiding examples exist for conducting qualitative research on Twitter. Therefore, we adopt an exploratory research design based on principles of qualitative research and purposeful sampling to map the chosen research field on the basis of in-depth analyses of selected cases, which are "exemplary" or

Dutch, French, and German), thus making the study more feasible. Moreover, the country's division into a Flemish and Walloon political landscape has resulted in different public debates (see De Cleen et al., 2017).

⁵ In 2016, a record of more than 15,000 asylum seekers (mainly Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans) were recognized in Belgium. A total of 18,710 people applied for asylum in 2016, less than half of the number of applications in the previous year, at the peak of the refugee crisis. Recent statistics can be consulted via the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless People: <http://www.cgvs.be/nl/cijfers#>.

"information-rich" for this field (Patton, 2002, p. 234). The main steps of our research process are represented in Figure 2.

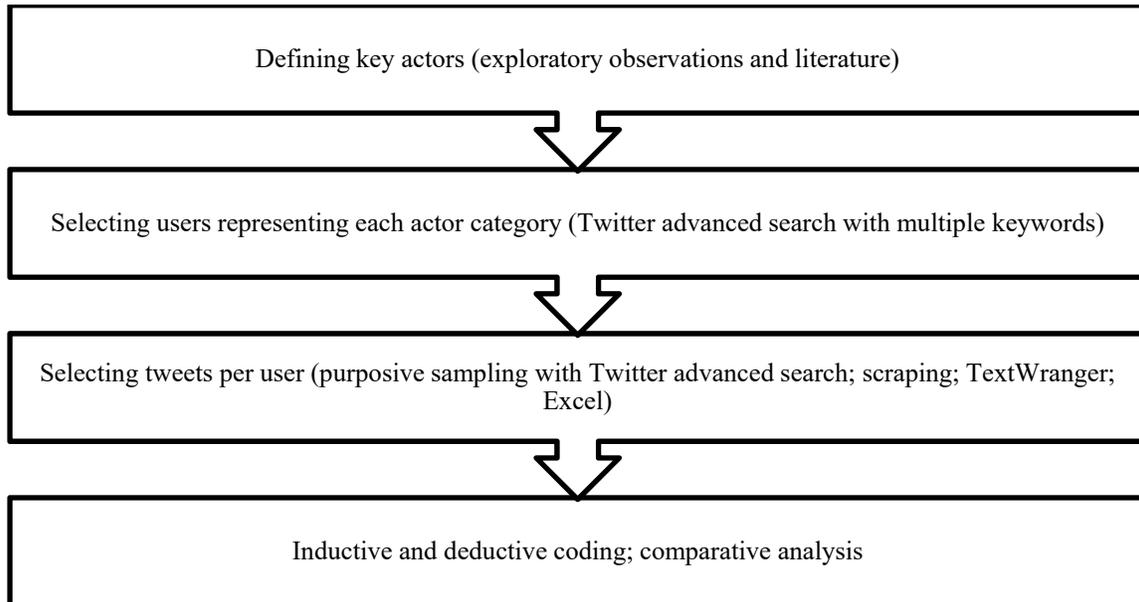


Figure 2. Main methodological steps in the research design.

Sampling and Analysis

In each step of our analysis, we used purposeful sampling for selecting users and their tweets. The first step in sampling with the aim of maximum variation, according to Patton (2002, p. 235), is to "identify diverse characteristics or criteria for constructing the sample." For this purpose, we first made observations about users who were tweeting about the images of Kurdi in September 2015. We used Twitter's advanced search function to search for the keywords "Syrians," "Aylan,"⁶ "refugees," "migrants," and "humanity"⁷ (Turkish and Dutch equivalents). Instead of focusing on popular hashtags throughout this period, such as #AylanKurdi or #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik ("HumanityWashedAshore"), we focused on keywords because tweets with hashtags represent only a limited part of the communication on Twitter (Bruns & Moe, 2013, p. 24).

On the basis of our search and observations, we identified citizens, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), politicians, and professional media outlets as the four major groups that were tweeting about the issue. We decided to focus on the first three as the most relevant actor groups. Our

⁶ The name was initially circulated as Aylan; hence, this was the most relevant keyword.

⁷ One of the most commonly used hashtags in relation to Alan Kurdi in Turkish was #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik, meaning "humanity washed ashore." In addition to this hashtag, many tweets made references to the crisis, guilt, or end of humanity, and, therefore, this keyword was included.

analysis focused on how different actor groups position themselves in relation to the refugee issue and whether these positions changed after the circulation of the images of Kurdi. Since the professional media accounts in Turkey and Flanders report developments without taking an outspoken position about the refugee issue, we decided to exclude them from our analysis. In a second step, we chose users in each country as examples for the specific actor group and aimed for maximum variation in terms of discursive positions and the user's relation to the refugee issue, number of followers, and activity level on Twitter. For the NGOs, we also included users who were not tweeting about Kurdi but who are active in refugee issues. For politicians, we selected the leaders of the five big national parties in Turkey and leaders of the federal and Flemish governments, leaders of Flemish political parties, and one of the main extreme-right politicians, Filip Dewinter, who is no longer the party leader but has been an influential figure in the public debate about migration since the 1990s. The citizen users were more challenging to select since the variety in this group is larger than in the other two. For this group, we identified different types of users in relation to their positions about the refugee issue (e.g., users who are clear government supporters, users with different tweet frequency about the refugee issue, etc.). Then we chose two to three typical users for each category.

Although we focused on September 2015 to choose the users for our analysis, the whole analysis examines the period between June 1, 2015, and July 30, 2016, because we are interested in not only what people tweeted about Kurdi but whether their positions toward refugees in their tweets changed over time after the images circulated.

Once we identified the analysis period and the actors, we downloaded all their tweets using a Python script and the Twitter API.⁸ We used the program TextWrangler to navigate within all the tweets and selected tweets of each user that were related to the refugee issue by using the same keywords as in the beginning of the analysis; then we copied all the related tweets to an Excel file.⁹ We also collected additional information about the users, providing valuable background for our analysis, such as the follower/followee numbers, profile description, and the year the user joined Twitter. In case a user tweeted a lot about the refugee issue, we selected tweets that were typical for each month. We included retweets and replies to tweets of the selected users and reconstructed conversations that took place among them. We concluded our material collection with 961 tweets from 72 users: 42 users and 434 tweets in the Flemish case and 30 users and 527 tweets in the Turkish case (see Table 1). The appendix¹⁰ contains a detailed list and brief descriptions of all selected users. Citizens' user names have been anonymized to protect their privacy, since they may not be aware that their tweets are being highlighted beyond the context of their original post.

⁸ The script was a tweaked version of this one: <https://gist.github.com/yanofsky/5436496>.

⁹ The tool used to download tweets was limited to 3,200 tweets per user, so in some cases, when users had a high number of tweets in the selected time period, we searched for refugee-related tweets through the Advanced search function of Twitter and added them manually to the excel sheet.

¹⁰ The appendix can be accessed at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/4ihx9lqigsw8pub/Appendix-Bozdag-Smets-2017-Understanding%20Alan%20Kurdi%20Images.docx?dl=0>.

Table 1. Sample Composition.

	Citizens	Politicians	Nongovernmental organizations	Total
<i>Flanders (Belgium)</i>				
Users per actor group	23	11	8	42
Number of tweets per actor group	202	115	117	434
<i>Turkey</i>				
Users per actor group	15	6	9	30
Number of tweets per actor group	285	15	227	527
<i>Total Flanders and Turkey</i>				961

After the data collection, we started analyzing the material more systematically using a mixed code scheme, consisting of inductive and deductive codes. Based on the literature, we identified categories that were relevant for the representation of migrants and refugees on media, especially mainstream mass media. For example, research shows that refugees are often represented from a threat or victim perspective (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015, p. 795; Horsti, 2013, p. 79). We included description of refugees in the tweets as an analysis category and threat and victim perspectives as subcategories. We also added the opportunity and agency perspectives to this category (see Table 2), which are scarcely mentioned in the literature but are present in our material in a few instances. The opportunity perspective represents refugees as an economic, political, or demographic opportunity. The agency perspective criticizes the victim and the threat perspectives and emphasizes the fact that one should see refugees as powerful individuals and encourage them to realize their goals.

Table 2. Coding Categories and Their Description.

Category	Description or subcategories
Account and tweet information	Date, username, follower/followee numbers, profile description
Used links and visuals	Content of the link and visuals
Representation of refugees	Threat, victim, opportunity, agents (Berry et al., 2015; Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Horsti, 2013; KhosraviNik, 2010; Mannik, 2012)
Perspective of representation	Individual vs. collective (KhosraviNik, 2010; Mannik, 2012)
Reasons for the refugee crisis	Reasons, explanations, people to blame (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015)
Solutions to the refugee crisis	Solutions offered to the current situation (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015)
References to Alan Kurdi	References to Kurdi in September 2015 and afterward

In addition to the representation of refugees, we included the perspective of representation in relation to strategies of individualization versus collectivization in the representation as a deductive category. Three further inductive categories that we developed on the basis of the tweets in the data corpus and in relation to our research questions are reasons provided by the users for the refugee crisis, the solutions offered, and references to Kurdi. The materials were coded in MS Excel.

Our research design has some limitations. Focusing on Twitter users only, we cannot generalize at the level of the society (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 669). Furthermore, the shortness of the tweets makes it challenging to understand the content of the messages without context information. We dealt with this challenge by collecting information about the time of the tweets (for example, if there was a prominent event at that time) and by looking at the user's previous and following tweets and conversations. Another limitation of the study is the lack of detailed background information about the actors, which confines our analysis to representations on Twitter rather than appropriation by the users. Despite these limitations and challenges, the research design proves to be fruitful for not only mapping different actor groups and discursive positions about the refugees but analyzing the changes and continuities in different users' positions about the issue.

Findings

Stylistic Varieties, Frequencies, and Intertextualities

Before turning to the specific findings for the three actor groups, it is worthwhile to discuss the overall characteristics of the tweets. First, the style and tone of tweets vary greatly across the data set. Emotions and affect play a key role in the collected tweets, particularly those explicitly referring to Kurdi. The range of emotions varies from sadness and benevolence to shame, anger, and pleasure along with a varying tonality of tweets from a sympathetic to an angry and hateful one. At the same time, however, we also observe a more factual, detached style in other tweets, which mainly "report" on refugee-related issues rather than "commenting" on them, and are most often observed among NGOs and politicians. Especially challenging was to interpret tweets that make use of a humorous register, such as ironic and absurd remarks or cartoons.

Second, there are vast differences in terms of tweet frequencies, although our limited data set did not allow investigating this in depth. Moreover, our data include users who tweet about refugees on a regular basis as well as users who rarely or never tweet about refugees. The latter group includes citizens and politicians whose refugee-related tweet frequency clearly correlates with particular events. In both Flanders and Turkey, these events included Kurdi's drowning (September 2015) as well as terrorist attacks in Istanbul's Sultanahmet district (January 2016) and in the Brussels metro and airport (March 2016). In Flanders, the circulation of the images also coincided with a crisis in the asylum application management, which led to the installment of an improvised camp in a park near the asylum authorities in Brussels in September 2015 and an intensified public debate (De Cleen et al., 2017). In Turkey, refugee-related tweets increased after the controversial EU-Turkey refugee deal (March 2016) and after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's proposal to grant prospective citizenship to Syrian refugees (July 2016).

Third, it is important to emphasize the multimodality of the data. As noted above, the tweets consist of not only written text but URLs, embedded images, and videos, hashtags, emoticons, and tags. Especially the links are very typical, as 512 of the analyzed 961 tweets contain a link to news websites, campaign Web pages, or other social media platforms. This demonstrates that Twitter is not an isolated platform when it comes to discussions about refugees; rather, it is highly interlinked with other online environments.

Citizens

Public perceptions of immigrants developed within specific contexts in Turkey and Flanders. Whereas immigration in Turkey is a relatively new phenomenon, with a steep increase in the number of (forced) immigrants in recent years, Flanders has been an immigration region for decades. Furthermore, public perceptions of immigration take shape in a broader context of societal polarization in Turkey (in relation to ethnicity, religion, and politics), whereas in Flanders, there is a rather dominant antimigration and anti-Islam discourse, nourished by decades of polarization of the extreme right (De Cleen et al., 2017).

Among citizens, victim and threat representations are common, while representations of refugees as an opportunity for society or refugees as active agents are virtually absent. When represented as victims, refugees are mostly described as voiceless victims of politicians. Strong pro- and antigovernment positions occur in both countries but are most explicit in Turkey. Refugees are also often represented as the victims of instrumentalization by mass media, politicians, and NGOs, who are claimed to use them to gain attention. The moral discontent with the wide sharing of the photographs of Kurdi among Twitter users sparked many comments in that regard. A Flemish user, for instance, posted the following: "I loathe the way in which media use the photo of Aylan for clicks and likes. Jeez. Use another picture of that child."¹¹ Some users also visualized this in their tweets—for instance, in the tweet shown in Figure 3.

¹¹ Unless stated otherwise, all quotes are translated by the authors from Dutch or Turkish. The tweets of citizens have been anonymized to protect privacy.



Figure 3. Tweet by an (anonymized) Flemish citizen: "Editorial offices that denounce abuse of washed ashore child. Self-reflexivity washed up lifelessly #Aylan."

The threat frame was also present in citizens' tweets generally referring to refugees as a threat to the economy, security, or social welfare system in both countries. In Turkey, the threat representation intensified during discussions on citizenship for Syrians or right after the terror attacks in the Sultanahmet district in Istanbul (January 12, 2016). Moreover, the publication of the images sparked the threat to take on a distinctly ethnic and political character, in reference to Kurdi's Syrian-Kurdish roots. Given the importance of the Kurdish issue in Turkish politics, this aspect was highlighted and led to sharp tweets. One of the harshest examples of hate speech against Kurds and Kurdi was deleted by its poster, but it was quoted by another user: "#AylanKurdi Best Kurd is the dead Kurd."

Our analysis of reasons and solutions for the increased flow of refugees shows the diverging ways citizens frame the refugee issue. Among Turkish citizens, the policies of the ruling AKP government are discussed in a very polarized way. While oppositional users blame AKP as the party in power, the progovernment users point at the opposition or the EU. An example here is posted by a user who has been writing regularly about the refugee crisis, holding the government responsible for the Syrian war: "You will use the opportunity to boil your eggs in your neighbor's fire. Then, you will say the humanity

takes refuge in Turkey.” Some citizens in Turkey also blame the EU for the refugee crisis—for example, the user whose tweet is shown in Figure 4 implies that Kurdi’s death reveals the EU’s incompetence.



Figure 4. Tweet by a Turkish citizen: “The French media indicate that not Aylan’s body, but the humanity and the EU is washed ashore.”

In Flanders, the division is rather between victim and threat representations. The latter users refer to a range of specific reasons: mostly economic pull factors (jobs, social welfare) and, accordingly, propose specific and strict solutions, such as closing borders, cutting benefits, or limiting the number of incoming refugees. Within this category of tweets, we also come across hateful content referring to the deportation or extermination of unwanted refugees—for example, in this user’s tweet from June 2016: “Bring #refugees to islands instead of giving them access to the #milkandhoney of Europe, like #Australia.” Conversely, users who represent refugees as victims are much less consistent or specific in their framing of the issue. They rarely situate the problem (referring to, for instance, a crisis of “humanity” and “solidarity” or the “deplorable state of the world”) and remain vague when formulating solutions (“someone” should do “something”). The following tweet from September 2, 2015, which included a photograph of Kurdi, intensifying the representation of the refugee as a victim, illustrates this vagueness: “Something has to happen. So poignant. This cannot leave anyone unmoved #AylanKurdi.”

Politicians

The use of social media by politicians in Turkey and Flanders differs significantly. In general, politicians in Turkey seem to be less active on social media than their Belgian colleagues, especially in relation to refugees. In recent years, the political agenda of Turkey has been dominated by other topics, such as authoritarian tendencies, press freedom, and the Kurdish issue. Although the refugee issue started to become a key social question in Turkey, it has not yet become a central topic in political debates. President Erdogan sent several notable tweets in June 2016, emphasizing Turkey's efforts in the refugee crisis. One tweet, in English, for example, stated that: "Turkey is the world's most generous country. Yet a handful of nations can't solve the problem if the world fails to take necessary steps," most likely referring to the EU. In Flanders, on the other hand, immigration and integration have been prominent on the political agenda for decades (see De Cleen et al., 2017). Interestingly, while politicians in Flanders generally tweeted frequently about refugees, one of the most influential and popular politicians, Bart De Wever, did not tweet about it at all. He defended his migration-skeptic viewpoints in television and newspaper interviews, which were then circulated on social media by others. Theo Francken, the federal state secretary responsible for asylum policy and migration and a member of the rightist and nationalist N-VA, is one of the most prominent and polarizing voices in the debate.

Among the tweets by Belgian and Flemish politicians, we notice more diversity in terms of representations and frames. The most common representation of refugees among both the leftist opposition and majority politicians is that of victims. Theo Francken, a key proponent of strict migration policies (De Cleen et al., 2017), mainly represents refugees as victims, supposedly to emphasize the achievements of himself and the federal government. The threat representation is most noticeable among the (extreme) right politicians, who describe refugees as either an economic threat (undermining the welfare system) or a cultural threat (referring to the supposed incompatibility of "Western" values and Islam—for instance, when it comes to gender equality). In the political center are a couple of politicians who represent refugees as an opportunity for the country. Wouter Beke, for example, the chairman of the Flemish Christian-Democrats, emphasizes in several tweets that refugees constitute an opportunity for the Flemish job market. As one of the few politicians, he also represents refugees as active agents—for instance, by sharing success stories of "well-integrated" refugees who are supposed to serve as role models.

Politicians frame the refugee crisis along majority-opposition lines. Again, there are few tweets by politicians in Turkey, who suggest that European countries should take responsibility. In Flanders, only politicians of the opposition mention distinct reasons for the refugee crisis—namely, economic pull factors (in the case of extreme right politicians) and particular policies of (EU) politicians in power. Some also refer to the Gulf countries that do not accept sufficient numbers of refugees. Interestingly, politicians rarely mentioned civil war or the Islamic State as reasons for the refugee crisis. When it comes to solutions, tweets by politicians are rather specific and either mention the achievements of the government (in the case of majority politicians) or demand more political action (in the case of opposition). Politicians across the political spectrum also refer to the integration of refugees into Flemish society as a key solution to the perceived refugee crisis.

NGOs

Our analysis includes NGOs that focus on not only refugees but other issues as well. Due to distinctly structured civil societies, there are some key differences between the Turkish and the Flemish NGOs. In Flanders, almost all analyzed NGOs are highly professionalized and internationally well connected, but this is the case for only some NGOs in Turkey. Furthermore, the polarization in Turkish society influences the NGOs, some of which are very critical and others that are very supportive of the government's actions.

Despite these contextual differences, the NGOs in Flanders and Turkey also share some patterns. For example, almost all of them regularly post information about their activities to support refugees. Furthermore, they often make use of humanitarian photography, especially focusing on images of children (see also Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2016, p. 1126). They emphasize the vulnerability of refugee children or the solace found through their aid campaigns, as, for instance, implied in a post of the Ankara-based Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Tweet by the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants showing a child participating in one of its activities.

Despite the wide use of children's images in their posts, most analyzed NGOs avoided the direct use of images of Kurdi and used this moment to legitimize and advocate their causes. NGOs are generally more advanced than other actor groups in their Twitter use, employing well-designed infographics and quote cards in addition to images (see, e.g., Figure 6). There are, however, some differences in this respect between smaller, local NGOs and larger, international NGOs, the latter having a more consistent and well-developed social media strategy.



Figure 6. Tweet by the Turkish NGO Support2Life: "You can follow our accounts, share them and help us to reach more people [to help] refugees."

Typically, NGOs tweet about the refugee issue to inform others about their activities and campaigns, often representing refugees as victims of war and bad living conditions in the host countries, and NGOs help them to improve their situation by providing food, legal counseling, education, housing support, and so on. NGOs also call for solidarity with refugees through their campaigns. For instance, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (a Flemish NGO supporting refugees and asylum seekers) tweeted news reports about its campaign in train stations on the occasion of World Refugee Day (June 19, 2015).

One additional form of portrayal, rarely observed in other actor groups, emphasized the fact that refugees should not be seen as victims, but simply as humans. This kind of framing is commonly used by a couple of NGOs that criticize the victim and the (economic) opportunity perspectives, and give refugees agency by portraying them as powerful individuals with rights. The Turkish Human Rights Organization,

for instance, claimed that the refugees are instrumentalized in the EU-Turkey refugee deal and tweeted: "Refugees must be seen as individuals with #humanrights not as objects to be negotiated with #europeanunion for no visa 2 #Europe. Aegean Sea." The agency perspective was a consistent frame used by this particular NGO.

Depending on their focus, NGOs frame the refugee issue in different ways. In the Turkish case, the political positioning of NGOs plays a role in how they perceive the refugee crisis and the responsible actors. Different from other actor groups, NGOs often speak of more specific problems caused by the refugee issue, such as problems faced in a certain migration route or acts of discrimination in a specific city. They also suggest concrete solutions to these problems with solidarity campaigns that they carry out and/or by addressing concrete actors, who cause or can solve problems, such as Amnesty International Turkey blaming the EU in one of its tweets for increasing the risk of human rights violations of refugees in Libya.

Discussion

Having discussed the results of our analysis for the three actor groups, we now discuss the findings more generally. We first compare the two main research questions (regarding representations and framings) across the actor groups. Then we compare the findings temporally and geographically.

First of all, the analysis shows that representations are dominantly constructed around self-explanatory *victimization* logics (522 of 961 tweets). This finding is largely in line with studies on media representations of refugees and asylum seekers on mainstream mass media (Berry et al., 2015; KhosraviNik, 2010). In their posts, users rarely specify *what* or *who* refugees are the victims of. The opposing *threat* representation occurs less, but it is often very explicit (118 of 961 tweets). It is particularly observed among Flemish right-wing politicians and among some Turkish and Flemish citizens. Those representations refer to economic and cultural-religious threats and "otherness" and thus tap into preexisting xenophobic discourses. In addition to these two main forms of representation, refugees are sometimes represented as an opportunity or as active agents, mostly by NGOs or politicians. Two dynamics occur across most analyzed tweets: Refugees are collectivized (in about 624 of 961 tweets), and users with outspoken political positions generally formulate much clearer (simpler) reasons and solutions for the refugee crisis.

One of the key aims in this research was to discover whether representations and framings changed over time, particularly given the iconic qualities of the images of Kurdi. It is true that tweets about refugees form cycles in relation to certain (national) events. As we have seen, the publication of the photographs of Kurdi constituted a much more global moment of intense public engagement with the topic of refugees. However, we argue that there is more consistency and continuity in the representations and framings about refugees on Twitter than one might expect. Rather than altering different actor groups' representations and framings about refugees and the refugee crisis, references to Kurdi are integrated into their preexisting discourses. Kurdi became an individual example that serves as evidence of already established ideas about refugees, about the (in)competence of certain politicians, about the state of the world, about Islam, about the work of NGOs, and so on. Moreover, we notice a shift from general refugee

issues to the issue of the fate of children or boat refugees, possibly as a result of the images of Kurdi. This was also expressed visually, particularly by several citizen users who posted creative interpretations of the images (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Drawing by a Flemish citizen inspired by the images of Kurdi. The tweet reads: "Finally I decided to make a drawing of Aylan #refugees #aylan #refugee."

This effect vanished after a few weeks for most users, but (subtle) references to Kurdi occurred throughout the studied period—for instance, in cartoons where young refugees wear blue pants and red T-shirts similar to his.

Two remarks should be made. First, one category of citizens, labeled "one-time tweeters," challenges this emphasis on continuity. This is a small group of users, both in Turkey and Flanders, who never post about refugees or migration but posted about Kurdi on September 2, 2015, or the days after. Those tweets were usually very emotional (using words such as "sadness" or "disgust") and often used visuals. Second, although discourses persist in the long-term perspective of the study, there was an awareness of an "Alan Kurdi moment" among many users. This became particularly clear in discussions about the (mis)use of the images by mainstream media or by other social media users for reasons of sensationalism.

The comparison of tweets from Turkey and Flanders draws attention to the different national contexts in which public discussions about global issues take place. The character and intensity of discussions about refugees on Twitter in both countries are different in the sense that there are many fewer intra-actor engagements (e.g., retweets, tags, and conversations among different actors, such as citizens or NGOs addressing politicians) in Turkey than in Flanders. Tweets are also much more polarized in the former. Another notable difference is the way in which Islam is mobilized. When reference is made to Islam in Turkey, it serves as a vehicle for solidarity and a religious obligation to help other Muslims. In Flanders, Islam is mentioned by certain politicians and citizens who explain it as the source of cultural differences. While there is significant mutual blaming for the refugee crisis (Flemish users blaming Turkey for using refugees as political leverage, Turkish users blaming EU politicians for not doing anything), there is also a common outsider: the Gulf countries, which are accused of not contributing anything to alleviate the suffering of refugees and even of meddling in the war in Syria. Interestingly, there is nearly no reference to the Islamic State in both countries.

One particular aspect of the Turkish tweets has to do with the fact that Alan Kurdi was of Kurdish-Syrian origin. The boy's ethnic origins are of particular relevance in the Turkish context, where the long-standing conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish movements has flared up partly because of the war in Syria. Twitter users in Turkey (sometimes implicitly) referred to ethnicity either to express support for the fate of Kurds (as a kind of pan-Kurdish expression of solidarity) or to make Turkish nationalist statements. We argue that this dimension in the Turkish context deserves more attention in future research. References to the ethnicity of refugees were completely absent in the Flemish tweets.

Conclusions

Rather than reproducing the notion of a global visual icon, our study reveals that the meanings of the images of Alan Kurdi diverge significantly when looking at specific national contexts. Although we do observe shared patterns of representation across the actor groups in both Turkey and Flanders (for instance, regarding the economic, cultural, and security threats posed by refugees), tweets about Kurdi—and refugees more generally—only garner meaning when they take into account the national contexts, mainly at three levels. First, distinct national political landscapes, with particular divisions, make for highly diverging debates on refugees, especially when it comes to pointing out reasons and solutions for the influx of refugees and the death of children like Kurdi. Second, religion, and Islam in particular, plays a central role throughout the tweets, either as a marker for cultural proximity, and thus a reason to express solidarity (in the case of many Turkish tweets), or as an indicator of cultural otherness and security threat (an underlying aspect in many Flemish tweets). Third, national migration history has a profound impact: Whereas the discourses in Flanders should mainly be seen as an extension and intensification of much older debates on the immigration of non-Europeans (De Cleen et al., 2017), the high number of refugees in Turkey is unprecedented and thus transforms debates in a more profound way.

Although much debate revolves around the idea of the refugee crisis, our study in fact deconstructs this notion by revealing a multitude of underlying, connected, contradicting, and changing meanings of "the refugee" and "a crisis." Refugees and the influx of refugees to Europe become a container for many other discussions about cultural values, economic developments, and (border)

security. These discussions are only meaningful in relation to national and local historical developments. We untangled some of these developments and relations through a qualitative, comparative analysis, which allowed the data to emerge within context.

Our study makes a claim for more qualitative research on Twitter. We have noted some challenges of quantitative and big data-driven research (on social media) and believe there is a need for a broader epistemological debate on methodology in social media research—and on Twitter in particular. To widen the range of methods and to open up the analytical space for social media research, we developed a methodology that guarantees a broad overview of a phenomenon (and some level of generalizability) while allowing for more in-depth and contextual interpretation of the data. Future research could further develop this framework, for instance, by including more actor groups (e.g., journalists, volunteers, activists) and by analyzing the extent to which different actor groups interact or form networks.

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