

## **The Distant Sufferer: Measuring Spectatorship of Photojournalism**

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The response of news audiences to graphic visual portrayals of distant suffering is a long-debated issue among media commentators, producers, and researchers alike. The increasing visualization of news media makes empirical evidence on this issue more important than ever. Recent studies of graphic images indicate that pictures have the power to mobilize people via emotions. Yet, little is known about other potential reactions embedded in the theory of distant suffering, such as apathy or voyeuristic pleasure. This study uses an experiment to, for the first time, quantify overlapping roles of the spectatorship of suffering. Via cluster analysis, we explore in which combinations responses of empathy, voyeurism, protest, and apathy co-occur. Exposing participants to victimizing photographs suggests that personal characteristics of participants play a larger role in the processing of distant suffering than the pictures' content. Besides shedding light on audience perception of suffering, this study provides empirical evidence for a fuller range of potential responses to photojournalism. The results are discussed in light of ethical difficulties with the visual depiction of war.

*Keywords: distant suffering, photojournalism, image effects, war and conflict, audiences, cluster analysis*

The hunt for more dramatic . . . images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value. (Sontag, 2003, p. 94)

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The picture of a naked girl running away from napalm explosions in the Vietnam War—called *The Terror of War*—is one of the most iconic news images ever taken, gaining worldwide attention to the present day (Miller, 2004). For the photo, Nick Ut won the 1973 Pulitzer Prize and the World Press Photo of the Year for outstanding photojournalism. Death, violence, and pain are recurring themes in the history of these prestigious contests (Zarzycka & Kleppe, 2013) and also take center stage in news photography that reaches a Western audience on a daily basis. The photojournalist's hunt for shocking images is summarized in the opening quote by Susan Sontag, who criticizes this objective in her 2003 essay "Regarding the Pain of Others." Countering this critique is the assertion that the camera does not lie and can help foster public understanding of the dramatic and harrowing sceneries of war (Zguri, 2014). Indeed, photojournalists have been called heroic for their endeavors to portray distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Griffin, 2010), and rightfully so: Many of them show great courage, putting themselves in extreme danger to make the horrors of humanitarian disasters more understandable for a Western audience. However, because viewers' responses to photography are only ever an individual's subjective interpretation of reality (Zguri, 2014), the normative value of graphic visual portrayals remains an important ethical discussion among media commentators, practitioners, and scholars alike (e.g., Durham, 2018; Keith, Schwalbe, & Silcock, 2006; Tait, 2017).

Scholarly justification for the shock value of photojournalism can be found in visual framing effects research showing that emotional responses to graphic images can mobilize citizens to political action (Iyer, Webster, Hornsey, & Vanman, 2014; Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015). Chouliaraki (2008) proposes that emotional responses, especially of empathy, to news visuals might function as "moral education" (p. 838) because they engage spectators with the issue at hand. This theoretical claim becomes worthy of scrutiny, however, when one considers that children often serve as the exemplification of the senselessness of war and are thereby instrumentalized (e.g., Maciá-Barber, 2013; Moeller, 2002). While the single child as the "ideal victim" can be an effective tool for raising money in humanitarian aid campaigns (Kogut & Ritov, 2005), this mobilized response does not capture all potential ways in which a spectator might react to graphic images.

Scholars have theorized about other, less desirable effects of violent imagery. This includes claims that it actually might turn spectators into passive voyeurs—responding with pleasure or awe—or leave them with apathy (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006; Höijer, 2004). However, despite today's increasingly visual media landscape, our understanding of the potentially diverse forms of visual spectatorship remains rudimentary (Coleman, 2010). Indeed, in comparison to the well-researched effects of graphic images on public opinion, in which citizens express emotions, attitudes and behaviors in support of intervention to help suffering victims of war (e.g., Pfau et al., 2006; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2015), other potentially undesirable responses have received minimal empirical attention. If audiences frequently respond with apathy or voyeurism, this in turn undermines the normative value of visual depictions of distant suffering and child victimization (Boltanski, 1999). Moreover, more complex constellations of spectatorship are possible, for example, if one feels both empathy for a victim and apathy that is due to the geographical distance from the depicted victim. Such complex responses are at the core of the theory of distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999).

To address these enduring issues, we use an experiment to measure a fuller spectrum of spectatorship responses to victimizing images of children and adults. This includes both normatively

desirable (empathy and protest) and less desirable responses (voyeurism and apathy). Importantly, we account for the potential co-occurrence of these responses by adopting a novel cluster analysis approach. In doing so, we quantitatively identify four groups of spectators in our sample who, we argue, reflect distinct spectatorship “roles” adopted by viewers of victimization images. By identifying and describing these roles, this study brings much-needed empirical evidence to the ethical discussion surrounding the spectatorship of distant suffering.

### **The Audience of Distant Suffering**

Every day, images of suffering people are distributed in the news, bearing testimony to violent conflicts across the globe. Professional war reporters deliver a collection of photographs that “offer viscerally exciting and voyeuristic glimpses into theaters of violence” (Griffin, 2010, p. 8). Sontag (2003) sharply criticizes the inability of these images to help the spectator understand, claiming that the horrors of war may only be shown to those who are actually in the position to change the situation; “the rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be” (p. 42).

Chouliaraki (2006) also theorizes about the “spectatorship of suffering,” but unlike Sontag (2003), focuses on moving images in television. She condemns the discrepancy between “the comfort of spectators in their living rooms and the vulnerability of sufferers on the spectators’ television screens” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 4). For her, watching the spectacle of another’s misfortune creates an ethical dilemma because spectators are limited in their action. Chouliaraki expects that they might be turned into “voyeurs, philanthropists or . . . protesters” (p. 203). She hereby draws from Boltanski’s (1999) theory of distant suffering, which by definition is the presentation of the suffering of “others” through the media (Joye, 2013). In line with Sontag (2003), Boltanski claims that there is a limitation to the actions the spectator can take and suggests that there is a kind of pleasure in horrifying images; the audience might find the aesthetics of it “sublime” (Boltanski, 1999). At the core of the theory is the claim that a spectator’s voyeurism—seeking stimulation by visual means—must eventually be overcome by showing empathetic reactions or even the urge to end the suffering (Susen, 2014). This already hints at the possibility that different reactions may be unified within the distant sufferer, reaching from pleasure to sympathy, which could occur simultaneously.

Studying the effect of suffering on the audience is, according to Joye (2013), urgent in communication science. Drawing from semistructured interviews with leading scholars, he concludes that audience perception of suffering needs to be tested empirically, stressing that “mediated meanings can have powerful social consequences” (Jensen, 2002, p. 273, as cited in Joye, 2013, p. 5).

Recently, scholars have taken quantitative approaches when researching this phenomenon and observed conflicting positions unified in the distant sufferer. Von Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) found that viewers of an online humanitarian campaign showed an increased personal responsibility, even if suffering was presented in a morally questionable way. Maier, Slovic, and Mayorga (2016) exposed participants to differently framed news stories of mass violence in Africa, including photographs, in their study. Interestingly, a majority of respondents expressed negative feelings after answering the questionnaire—but the degree of negativity depended on the way the content was presented. When exposed to a straight news

story lacking personalization or imagery, participants reacted with more indifference. This apathetic feeling finds an explicit focus in this study.

Distant suffering has also received attention in qualitative research by Scott (2014) and Kyriakidou (2014), who conducted interviews with focus groups exposed to television news reports. Both agreed that different types of spectatorship are detectable. Scott (2014) found that participants often reacted with indifference and solitary enjoyment, stating that the suffering of others did not affect their everyday life, while appreciating their own safety, which occurred more frequently for male participants. Kyriakidou (2014) identified four distinct types of audience responses: affective witnessing—people who reacted highly emotionally, combined with a feeling of powerlessness; ecstatic witnessing—viewers with unconditional empathy toward sufferers; politicized witnessing—an audience reacting with the urge to start a political discourse; and detached witnessing—a group of viewers who did not find the suffering relevant to their everyday life. In her interviews with a Greek focus group, Kyriakidou (2014) found evidence for all positions. However, the qualitative research put forward does not allow for objectively assessing different types of spectatorship and quantifying their nature and prevalence in audiences at large. That is the goal of this study.

Overall, previous research suggests that audience engagement with distant suffering is highly complex. The spectator may experience different responses—or even a mixture of multiple reactions at the same time—and therefore acts as a “free’ agent” (Chouliaraki, 2008). The predominant responses identified so far can be described as (1) empathy for the distant other (e.g., Kyriakidou, 2014; Scott, 2014), (2) mobilization to take some kind of action (e.g., Kyriakidou, 2014), (3) voyeurism, involving contemplation in awe (e.g., Boltanski, 1999; Kyriakidou, 2014; Scott, 2014; Sontag, 2003) and (4) apathy due to the inability to act (e.g., Scott, 2014; Sontag, 2003). In this study, these effects are measured via four key dependent variables: (1) empathy, (2) protest, (3) voyeurism, and (4) apathy. We capture the inherent complexity in spectatorship by using a novel cluster analysis approach to assess how these responses co-occur within our sample.

Based on extant findings, it was not possible to hypothesize a prediction about response combinations and their frequency. The first research question for this study is therefore as follows:

*RQ1: How prominently and in which combinations do the identified witnessing responses (empathy, protest, voyeurism, apathy) occur within spectators of distant suffering?*

### **Relationships Between Responses to News Images**

Research on the effects of news images has already involved looking into some of the key variables introduced in this article, such as empathy and protest. These responses appear to be highly linked to the emotions experienced by the spectator. Coleman (2010) states that news visuals affect consumers very differently from text: “Photographs, particularly highly evocative ones . . . leave an emotional trace that in time will supplant most of the written or spoken details . . . of the story. Processing this story, then, involves an emotional lamination” (p. 239). Emotions have been observed to function as mediators in visual framing effects, where news images emphasize a certain aspect of a story that can in turn influence intended

behavior (Geise & Baden, 2015). In a recent experiment, Powell et al. (2015) showed participants images of a relatively unknown conflict. Their findings suggest that pictures alone, without accompanying text, can trigger emotions that in turn lead the spectator to show behavioral intentions to help those embroiled in the conflict.

Overall, empathetic emotions and the motivation to protest seem to be highly interlinked; the feeling of empathy is a predictor for the eventual willingness to take action (e.g., Iyer et al., 2014). Furthermore, it can be expected that those reacting with apathy would not respond in an empathic or mobilized fashion to graphic photography (Scott, 2014). According to Scott (2014), people reacting toward another's misfortune with indifference found it hard to empathize and engage with the suffering in any kind of way. Regarding voyeurism, no prediction can be made because it has not been tested before. In addition, these four identified key variables have yet to be measured in combination. Therefore, a second research question is proposed, focused on the interrelationships between the responses of empathy, protest, voyeurism, and apathy:

*RQ2: How do the potential responses of empathy, protest, voyeurism, and apathy relate to one another?*

### **Photojournalism and the Child Victim**

The representation of the pain of others in the media can be linked to the photographing of war and disaster (e.g., Sontag, 2003). This concerns photojournalists because they are the ones responsible for the creation of images. Simultaneously, subjects of war reporting are highly vulnerable individuals who cannot control whether they are being photographed. Victims may become instrumentalized to raise awareness. In this context, several scholars contributed to the ethical discussion of the child victim. Seu (2015) identifies children as "ideal" victims because they have the potential to evoke empathy within aid campaigns and therefore can function as mobilizers. Höijer (2004) investigated this phenomenon in television reporting, stating that a child's crying and sadness evoke pity, making the spectator want to protect the subject. According to Moeller (2002), children are the perfect exemplification of the senselessness of war.

It can be assumed that children are therefore consciously portrayed. Yet again, this raises an ethical dilemma. Maciá-Barber (2013) analyzed visual coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, finding that images often "violate children's right to privacy, and frequently infringe settled principles of professional journalistic deontology" (Maciá-Barber, 2013, p. 89). A content analysis by Fahmy (2010) has also found that pictures from the Afghan war very frequently depicted women and children, which shows the dominance of human-interest frames in visual conflict reporting. According to Seu (2015), who qualitatively interviewed viewers of humanitarian communication campaigns showing violated children, the exposure to the child victim can also lead to desensitization, which makes intrusions into their private sphere even more questionable.

Scholars agree that images of distant suffering, especially of child victims, create an ethical concern (Maciá-Barber, 2013; Sontag, 2003). On the one hand, it puts photographers in a delicate position because they are being applauded for such depictions. On the other hand, the discussion focuses on the effect that their images eventually have on the spectator. This makes the study of different audience reactions highly relevant, especially concerning the usage of children. If the child victim evokes more empathy than a group

of adults and motivates more people to take positive action, it could justify taking the child's photograph. If, however, it leaves spectators with indifference to a large extent, the practice becomes more questionable.

This study will therefore use award-winning press photography that portrays children as victims as the key independent variable. This ought to be even more powerful when presenting the child victim alone, without a benefactor or a group. According to Slovic (2007), single victims are more touching because they constitute a psychologically coherent unit. This can lead to greater distress and more compassion within the spectator compared with when the spectator is presented with a group of victims (Slovic, 2007). By defining the single identifiable child as the ideal victim and therefore a suitable example of distant suffering, the following hypothesis is put forward:

*H1: Pictures of child victims will create stronger empathic responses within the spectators than pictures of groups of adult victims.*

### **Gender Differences in the Perception of Distant Suffering**

When it comes to global compassion, scholars have observed not only the potential victim evoking it but also the individual witnessing it. According to Höjjer (2004), who exposed people to television news reports of suffering, women showed empathetic reactions more often than men. Female participants even indicated that they sometimes had to cry or turn away from the report because they were becoming increasingly emotional.

Hillman, Rosengren, and Smith (2004) observed physiological responses of participants toward affective images. They also found a gender difference in their study, stating that females showed an increased movement away from unpleasant pictures, such as scenes of mutilation. Men, on the contrary, showed a movement toward the unpleasant picture (Hillman et al., 2004). Gender appears to matter in regard to witnessing violence, as has already been observed within qualitative research on distant suffering (Højjer, 2004; Scott, 2014). What is more, according to Mrug, Madan, Cook, and Wright (2015), violence can even decrease perceived empathy. Using an empathic concern scale, the authors investigated to what extent participants feel empathy under exposure to real-life media violence. The ability to understand and empathize deteriorated at a high exposure level, especially for males (Mrug et al., 2015). Overall, men are found to enjoy violence in the media more than women (Hoffner & Levine, 2005), which motivates the following hypotheses:

*H2a: Male participants will more frequently react with apathy and voyeurism than female participants.*

*H2b: Female participants will more frequently react with empathy and show willingness to protest compared with male participants.*

## **Methodology**

### ***Design***

An online survey-embedded experiment was conducted in which participants were randomly assigned to one of four different photographs. Two of the photos showed a child victim alone, and the two others showed male adult victims in groups. Responses to the child and adult image pairs were later combined and treated as one variable for data analysis, thus improving the study's generalizability. The caption remained the same for all photographs. Randomization checks showed that there were no significant differences between the two condition groups regarding participants' gender, age, knowledge about the conflict, interest in photojournalism, and political orientation. Participants were asked to fill out the survey on a laptop and not use a smartphone or tablet to keep the size of the stimulus approximately even.

### ***Participants***

Our sampling procedure aspired to question a group of people with no formal training regarding media and journalism and who did not have a strongly formed opinion on crisis photography or an unusually high exposure to it. In an attempt to achieve this, 127 business students, aged 18–34 years, from a small university in Germany constituted the sample of this study. Two e-mails over the course of two weeks were sent to 520 of all currently enrolled business students. Additionally, the researcher visited several lectures personally, both to briefly present the study and to motivate students to participate. Of 157 responses, 28 had to be excluded because of incompleteness of the survey. Because the gender of the respondent was crucial to test the hypotheses, two participants who did not indicate their gender were also excluded. Most participants were female ( $n = 81$ ). The political orientation of participants turned out to be moderately distributed ( $1 = \text{very left}$ ;  $10 = \text{very right}$ ;  $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ). An attentiveness check was included at the beginning of the questionnaire; participants who failed were shown a message asking for their attention for the rest of the study ( $n = 28$ ).

### ***Stimuli***

The photographs constituting the child victim frame were retrieved from the World Press Photo Award website and are part of a photo essay called "Douma's Children" by Abd Doumany (World Press Photo, 2016). It was awarded the second prize in 2016 in the category General News stories. The original intent was to include more photos from the essay, again for generalizability, but a pretest revealed that only two were unambiguously identified as showing children. To contrast the single child victim, two photos of groups of adults were selected, also taken in Douma, Syria, in the aftermath of the airstrike massacres of 2014 and 2015; these were retrieved from regular news websites. The two pairs showed very similar content (child close-up with blood on their faces, and adult males carrying a wounded person). At least two photos were picked per stimulus group to avoid the drawing of conclusions from a single photograph.

The Syrian civil war is highly visible in the news currently. The specific event of the airstrike massacres in Douma, however, is a rather unknown event. Even though it would have been ideal to choose a less known conflict to minimize prior exposure, it is important for the ethical discussion to include prize-

winning press photography in this study. Because photography awards are predominantly given to pictures covering relevant current conflicts, choosing the specific photos from Douma seemed an adequate compromise. Participants furthermore indicated rather low self-reported knowledge about both history of the civil war ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ; 1 = *not knowledgeable at all*, 7 = *extremely knowledgeable*) and, especially, the airstrike massacres ( $M = 1.40$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ). The stimuli can be seen in Figure 1.



*Note:* Upper images taken by Abd Doumany and originally photographed on February 2, 2015. Retrieved from [www.worldpressphoto.org](http://www.worldpressphoto.org) on May 23, 2017. Lower left image found in AFP/Getty Images, published on November 7, 2015. Retrieved from [www.ethiogrio.com](http://www.ethiogrio.com) on May 23, 2017. Lower right image found in Reuters, published on September 14, 2014. Retrieved from [www.blogs.ft.com](http://www.blogs.ft.com) on May 23, 2017.

**Figure 1. Stimulus material from the child victim condition (upper images) and adult victim condition (lower images), including caption.**

As the conflict in Syria entered its fifth year, the city of Douma, the largest opposition stronghold in Damascus province, was subject to sustained bombardment. Figures are hard to confirm, but the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC), an independent NGO, puts civilian fatalities in and around Douma at 1,740 in the first half of 2015 alone. (World Press Photo, 2016)



### **Procedure**

Before stimulus exposure, participants were asked to self-report their knowledge about the background of the photographs, their overall interest in press photography, and their level of exposure to pictures portraying war, conflict, and disasters, plus their political orientation.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the photographs and the caption to focus on for at least 20 seconds. The pretest showed that this was the minimum time needed to capture the basic content of the photograph and scan the caption. After the forced exposure time, participants could continue whenever they felt ready. Then the measures of dependent variables of the different spectatorship responses were displayed, as specified in the measures section. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide basic personal information, followed by a debriefing.

### **Measures**

Self-reported knowledge was measured on 7-point Likert scales (*1 = not knowledgeable at all, 7 = extremely knowledgeable*), and interest in photojournalism and exposure to war photography were measured on 5-point scales (*1 = not interested at all, 5 = extremely interested; 1 = never, 5 = every day*).

After viewing the stimulus, the key dependent variables were measured (*1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree*). This started with three items measuring empathy ( $\alpha = .75$ ), using questions that have been adapted from Escalas and Stern (2003), who define empathy as the "capacity to feel within or in another person's feelings" (p. 567). One example of measurement is therefore, "*Looking at this photo, I could imagine what the person in the picture was feeling.*" Second, voyeurism ( $\alpha = .77$ ) was measured. Here, inspiration was drawn from studies conducted by Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) and Baruh (2010), who measured self-reported voyeurism within the audience of reality TV shows. Even though this constitutes a different context, the studies appeared to be appropriate templates because they also measured reactions toward visuals. The items combined the pleasure and appreciation of insight that the photograph was giving. An example is, "*I like the picture because it gives me an insight that I normally wouldn't get.*" Protest ( $\alpha = .73$ ), or feeling the urge for action, was measured within the same items used by Powell et al. (2015), including *intention to discuss, donate, sign a petition*. Last, self-designed measures of apathy ( $\alpha = .89$ ) were included, drawn from the statements of participants in Scott's (2014) study, combining the lack of affect due to spatial distance (e.g., "*Looking at the photograph leaves me with indifference, because all this is happening so far away*").

Additionally, participants were asked two questions to determine if they appreciated the photograph in itself, to examine if they recognized a difference between award-winning and regular news photos. Finally, a successful manipulation check question asked people whether there was a child in the picture they were presented with ( $p < .001$ ).

### **Analysis**

Cluster analysis was conducted to answer the proposed research questions, which classified participants into distinct groups with differing response combinations (RQ1 and RQ2). Furthermore, a Pearson's chi-square test was conducted to discover the relationship between gender and the identified cluster categories (H2a and H2b).

To examine the influence of gender and victim type in the evaluation of distant suffering, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, including gender (female; male) and the two image conditions (adult victims; child victim) as independent variables, and the different spectator responses (empathy, voyeurism, protester, apathy) as dependent variables. The effect of the victim images and participants' gender on these responses was hereby examined (H1, and H2a and H2b).

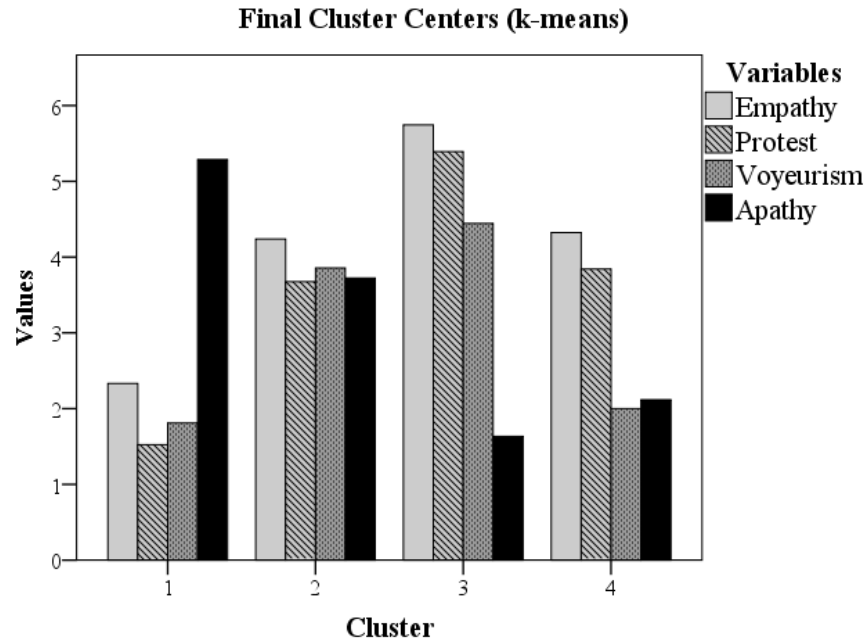
### **Results**

#### ***Cluster Analysis: Identifying Groups of Spectators***

Cluster analysis is an exploratory multivariate method. Cases of a sample—in this study, the participants exposed to distant suffering—are being classified into a number of distinct groups. This happens based on a set of variables that should at least be measured on an ordinal scale (Cornish, 2007). In this study, this was participants' degree of empathy, voyeurism, protest, and apathy.

For this study, a k-means cluster analysis was deemed to be most suitable, considering the moderately sized data set and the highly interpretable outcome. The k-means method allows the researcher to decide how many clusters should be identified by the data analysis software. Hence the clustering was repeated several times for different numbers of clusters. Ultimately, a four-cluster solution was found to be most meaningful, producing most dissimilar groups.

Repeating k-means and comparing options is a recommended procedure (Cornish, 2007). Because all variables were measured on the same scale (1=*strongly disagree*; 7=*strongly agree*), there was no need to compute standardized z scores. To double-check the choice of four clusters, two-step clustering in SPSS was conducted. The model summary indicated that the cluster quality was fair, whereas all variables had a high predictor importance (0.68–1.00), meaning that they all had a meaningful impact on the classification of cases. The visualization of the k-means clusters is the most straightforward way to interpret the result and is depicted in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Bar chart of final cluster centers retrieved from k-means clustering.**

As can be seen from the bar graph, four different groups of spectators (clusters) were identified. These cluster groups displayed distinct profiles of responses to the images of distant suffering in this study. To characterize the membership of these groups and to build on past literature (e.g., Kyriakidou, 2014; Scott, 2014), we assigned the following spectatorship “roles” to the four clusters:

- (1) The apathetic spectator: people high on apathy, low on everything else
- (2) The conflicted spectator: people who have approximately the same mean on all the roles
- (3) The ideal spectator: people very high on protesting and empathy, including a noteworthy score on voyeurism, lowest on apathy
- (4) The moral spectator: people higher on protesting and empathy and low on apathy and voyeurism

For all clusters, protest and empathy behaved very similarly—when someone scores high or low on one, the person will also score equivalently on the other. At the same time, apathy and protest behave completely contrary to one another. The first cluster (the apathetic spectator) is distinctive by people’s indifference to the images. The second cluster (the conflicted spectator) is an interesting case, exhibiting similar levels of all responses, illustrating the complexity of spectatorship of distant suffering. The last two clusters mostly differ by their degree of voyeurism. The third cluster (ideal spectator) is “ideal” because this group has the highest means of empathy and protest—desirable features of a distant sufferer. The fourth

(moral spectator), however seems to be more "moral"; voyeurism and apathy are equally low in this group. The exact mean scores of final cluster centers and how frequently they occurred in the sample are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Final Cluster Centers Retrieved From K-means Clustering.**

Roles	Clusters			
	1 Apathetic spectator	2 Conflicted spectator	3 Ideal spectator	4 Moral spectator
Empathy	2.33	4.24	5.75	4.32
Voyeur	1.81	3.86	4.44	2.00
Protest	1.52	3.68	5.39	3.84
Apathy	5.29	3.72	1.63	2.12
Total 127 (100 %)	7 (5.5 %)	35 (27.6 %)	51 (40.1 %)	34 (26.8 %)

*Note.*  $N = 127$ ; high scores indicate high values of attitudes (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Scores for the protest and apathy variables showed the most variation across the four identified clusters.

Taken together, the results of the k-means cluster analysis answer RQ1 and RQ2 because they show the relation of the responses to each other and how frequently the role profiles occur: Overall, apathetic spectators constitute the smallest group ( $n = 7$ ; 5.5%). There are two large groups: ideal and moral spectators ( $n = 51$ , 40.1%; and  $n = 34$ , 26.8%). Moreover, a considerable number of people appear to be conflicted in their attitudes toward distant suffering ( $n = 35$ ; 27.6%). Repeating k-means analysis for both image condition groups separately (1 = adult victims; 2 = child victim) did not change the cluster solution remarkably.

A closer look into the different cluster groups, specifically the distribution of gender, indicated that this variable played a significant role for the classification into clusters, as a chi-square test revealed:  $\chi^2(3, N = 127) = 13.51, p = .004$ . Fisher's Exact Test, conducted to account for the small cell counts in the apathetic spectator group, also produced a significant result. Men were more often part of the apathetic spectator group ( $n = 6$ ; 4.7% of the total sample) than women ( $n = 1$ ; 0.8%). Females constitute a large part of the ideal spectator group ( $n = 39$ ; 30.7%) compared with males ( $n = 12$ ; 9.4%). A similar tendency is noticeable in the moral spectator group. The conflicted spectator group had an approximately even number of men and women. These findings support hypotheses H2a and H2b.

### **MANOVAs: Exploring Responses Toward Child Victims**

The image conditions (adult victims; child victim) did not have a significant effect on the respondent's indications of empathy, voyeurism, protest, or apathy, as the conducted MANOVAs showed. As such, H1 has to be rejected: Participants who viewed a child image do not react with more empathy or willingness to protest.

The conducted MANOVAs revealed a statistically significant difference between men and women in reported empathy,  $F(1,123) = 15.309, p < .01$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .879$ , protest  $F(1,123) = .909, p = .008$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .879$  and apathy  $F(1,123) = 7.126, p = .009$ ; Wilks'  $\Lambda = .879$ . Females reported significantly more empathy toward the child ( $M = 5.35, SD = 1.09$ ) compared with males ( $M = 4.28, SD = 1.38$ ). Also, women who saw the adults indicated more protest ( $M = 4.43, SD = 1.08$ ) than males ( $M = 3.73, SD = 1.30$ ), which fully supports hypothesis H2b. In regard to apathy, male respondents reacted significantly more strongly ( $M = 2.96, SD = 1.47$ ) than females ( $M = 2.08, SD = 1.11$ ) when seeing the child victim. As for voyeurism, no significant differences could be found. Because of the gender gap regarding empathy and especially apathy, hypothesis H2a is partly supported: Male participants are more likely to react with apathy, but not necessarily with voyeurism. Overall, gender is found to have a stronger influence on responses of empathy, protest, voyeurism, and apathy than whether a respondent saw a suffering child or adult victims. Mean differences are visualized in Figure 3. Overall, hypothesis H2a is partly supported, and H2b is fully supported.

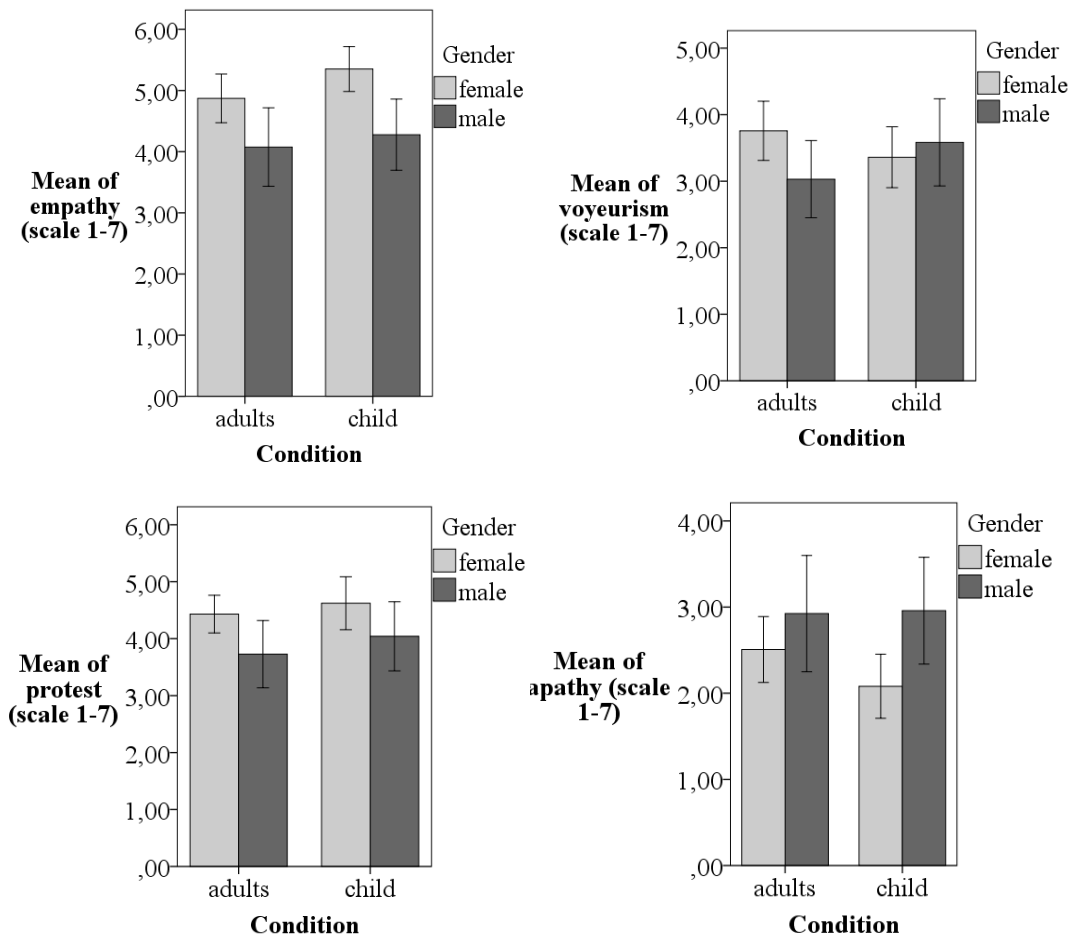


Figure 3. Mean bars with standard errors differentiated by gender and conditions, 95% CI.

## Discussion

This study investigated how varying depictions of victims of the Syrian civil war affected the viewer and identified distinct spectatorship roles that an audience adopts when presented with distant suffering. It is the first study to tackle this issue with a quantitative approach—rendering spectatorship measurable and identifying in which combinations the theoretically identified responses of empathy, protest, voyeurism, and apathy occur. Four distinct spectatorship roles were identified, which characterize the different positions that audience members may adopt when viewing visual depictions of distant suffering: (1) the apathetic spectator, (2) the conflicted spectator, (3) the ideal spectator, and (4) the moral spectator. These findings go beyond responses identified in qualitative research (Kyriakidou, 2014; Scott, 2014) by using a quantitative cluster analysis approach that takes advantage of the inherent complexity of responses to distant suffering (e.g., the conflicted spectator role). In doing so, this study lends much-needed empirical weight to long-standing ethical discussions about audience effects of photojournalism and media effects in general.

The study further contributes to research on the effects of graphic news images. There were small and nonsignificant differences between participants who were presented with a suffering child and those who saw groups of adults in a desperate situation. Instead, individual characteristics mattered more for the moral position taken. Significant gender differences were found within the witnessing indicators; women overall reacted with more empathy and showed a willingness to act, in contrast to males, who indicated stronger indifference. Furthermore, gender was found to be a significant predictor for the classification into clusters, further underlying the tendency of men to react with apathy and women to react with empathy. Besides being in line with gender differences observed in focus group research by Scott (2014) or Höijer (2004), this further underlines the complexity of image effects as highly dependent on individual characteristics (Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002).

So what do these findings imply for photojournalists and their presentation of suffering in light of media ethics? Overall, this study firmly orients Boltanski's (1999) theory of distant suffering toward the witnesses themselves, rather than the type of suffering being witnessed. When it comes to moral responses to media portrayals of another's misfortune, audience characteristics seem to matter more than content. It is therefore crucial to note that neither the photographers nor the editors making publication choices should be held responsible for individuals' responses to dramatic images, especially if we assume that they have noble intentions of visually reporting the truth to the public. In this study, gender proved to be a particularly important personal feature of the spectator. A fuller range of individual factors, such as interest in photojournalism, should be observed in future studies to appreciate the full complexities of visual media effects. Moreover, it is, of course, not only the photojournalist that determines the images that we see in the media. Editorial decisions and broader trends such as mediatization play a role and should be the subject of further research in this context.

The cluster analysis revealed that groups of people indicating strong empathy and protest were predominant within this sample—namely the moral spectator and ideal spectator. This is an encouraging finding for the noble intentions of practicing photojournalists. Despite a noteworthy amount of voyeurism, the latter role is called ideal because it possesses the highest means regarding honorable implications of empathy and

protest. These indicators even correlated positively with voyeurism, indicating that this may be a factor worth observing, but one that does not constitute a normatively undesirable or threatening outcome. But does this make the condemnation of voyeurism by Susan Sontag (2003) and others obsolete?

Even if voyeurism does not appear to diminish empathy or protest, the detected roles in this study are to some extent worrisome. That there was a group present in the identified clusters that reacted predominantly with apathy should concern journalists responsible for the depiction of distant suffering. One could, however, also see the limited size of the cluster group (5.5% of the sample) as a positive sign regarding the ethics of spectatorship. Replication is needed to provide perspective of this role in other contexts.

Simultaneously, the role of the conflicted spectator is worthy of further observation because the notion of simultaneous empathic and apathetic witnessing lies at the core of debates about distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999). It is possible that participants became overwhelmed by their exposure to the suffering others and confused about what to feel. Alternatively, members of this group of spectatorship could simply be realistic about their scope to help, therefore unifying all potential reactions to the same extent because all seem appropriate. Follow-up research employing qualitative methods is important for untangling this conflicted role. Taken together, the apathetic spectator and the conflicted spectator are two undesirable outcomes of witnessing another's pain, which pose a potential threat to the vindication of victimizing images and support the criticism put forward by various scholars (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2008; Höijer, 2004; Sontag, 2003).

Moreover, showing the intention to act and actual behavior are two distinct things. Chouliaraki (2006) claims that good journalism exceeds the act of purely reporting what happens, but engages people to take action. A trigger for this can be empathy. This study provides evidence that helping behavior is indeed closely linked to empathy because these responses are closely correlated across the identified spectatorship roles. Yet, the struggle remains how to translate a feeling into meaningful actions (Maier et al., 2016). According to Kyriakidou (2014), "cosmopolitan empathy" (p. 228) has a limited effect, because the viewer is "positioned within the moral space of the national and local" (p. 229). When already limited in his or her ability to empathize, the spectator must be even more restricted in reaching the threshold of actual behavior. Future studies should therefore relate images of distant suffering to actual helping behavior, such as donations or protest (Maier et al., 2016).

Overall, this study largely questions the frequently asserted "power of the picture" and to what extent it can influence actions. The famous World Press Photo by Nick Ut of the "napalm girl" is credited with ending the Vietnam War (Miller, 2004). In reality, political settlements were made long before the picture was taken. In *Getting It Wrong*, Campbell (2016) provides a clear analysis of historic events, claiming that the image might have led to public outcry, but it did not change the process of political decision making. A similar occurrence is the photograph of Alan Kurdi in 2015, a refugee boy lying dead on the Mediterranean coast. The picture went viral on social media, but the compassion was fugacious. According to the Poynter Institute, "[It] was a photo that shook the world—or at least the media—for a few days. But not much more than that" (Warren, 2015, as cited in Maier et al., 2016, p.1013). Images might have the power to move people, but they do not really start a movement (Domke et al., 2002). In this study, the apparently more

“powerful” World Press Photo–winning pictures of child victims did not heighten spectators’ empathetic positions significantly. Rather, personal features of the recipient, most notably gender, had more to do with how suffering was perceived.

It is crucial to note that there is likely to be a social desirability bias within the measured dependent variables of this study; participants will assume it more appropriate to indicate moral actions rather than admitting apathy or even voyeuristic enjoyment. Indeed, empathy and protest were participants’ dominant responses across the sample. Generally, the creation of the key role indicators was one of the biggest challenges because of the limited body of literature to draw from, which makes this study all the more unique. The developed items are reliable, yet the results have to be taken with caution, and replication is needed. Self-reported voyeurism especially is a challenging variable to measure. Openly admitting to “enjoying” the viewing of a violently hurt child is not common, and people might not even have thought about the factors that might make them “like” this type of picture before taking the survey. This may have made it harder for them to confess any appreciation of the image. What is more, voyeurism in itself might occur naturally when looking at a picture, without malign intentions. The act itself may be a passive one, and it is unclear what the appropriate reaction would be. Multiple scholars argue that in the context of distant suffering, it is futile to measure complex feelings of the individual on a larger scale because it will not do justice to the diverse ways of how the spectator reacts in reality (Huiberts, 2016). We nevertheless argue that an empirical approach is vital for shedding light on the spectatorship of distant suffering and that triangulation through multiple methods—including focus groups and interviews, as well as quantitative approaches—is the way ahead. Another limitation is the constitution of the sample. Aside from comprising students, more females than males took the survey, which means that the conducted cluster analysis can only give an initial indication of how spectators may group together.

Despite these limitations, the creation of the items measuring empathy, protest, voyeurism, and apathy can be described as successful. An additionally conducted factor analysis, which can be found in the appendix of this article, demonstrated that they all constitute separate dimensions. They are a valuable contribution to future research on distant suffering and should provide a stimulus to more quantitative approaches. The inclusion of voyeurism and apathy in particular in the study of graphic news visuals should be pursued because they have been neglected. The findings further contribute to the critical reflection of photojournalists charged with capturing shocking images, who can now consult empirical role profiles and numbers reflecting how their audience responds. Considering the prominence of the Syrian civil war in today’s news, other and lesser known conflicts should also be observed. Participants may have already been desensitized by the daily exposure to news images from Syria or, in contrast, they may have an increased issue awareness. One might even say that the distant sufferer has become less distant in recent years because suffering from afar has been presented in completely new ways. Social media apps such as Instagram offer users the possibility to embed a visual feed of war reporters in their everyday life, looking at it in the midst of light or personal content. A longitudinal approach would help to illustrate how the usage of this app and everyday exposure to a photojournalist’s account shape and possibly fatigue a Western distant sufferer over time.

Another variable that should be considered is actual physical distance from the sufferer. Respondents from a different culture might have produced very different results. Also, the press in the United States, for instance, reports about terrorism differently than the press in other parts of the world



(Barnett & Reynolds, 2009). Hence, the way messages are being produced, distributed, and ultimately interpreted may vary greatly. This study touches on these central ideas of media reception theory (Hall, 1980) and could help push them forward in the future.

To conclude, this study adds to the understanding of the phenomenon of distant suffering and provides novel findings and thought-provoking impulses. It further underlines the complexity of spectatorship, provides empirical role profiles that capture this complexity, and emphasizes individual differences as a key predictor of visual effects. Returning to Susan Sontag's quote, this study challenges the justification of shocking news images in a new way and takes an important step toward lending empirical evidence to her claims.

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## Appendix

**Table A1. Factor Analysis: Dimensions of Responses to News Images.**

Dimensions	Components	Urge for Action	Voyeurism	Empathy	Degree of Commonality
		(protest/apathy)			
		1/2	3	4	
Apathy	The photograph gives me a feeling of apathy because the events don't concern me.	-.900			.828
	Looking at the photograph didn't really affect me because there is nothing I can do anyway.	-.893			.821
	Looking at the photograph leaves me with indifference, because all this is happening so far away.	-.820			.677
Protest	After looking at the photograph, I would sign a petition that helps to stop the suffering in Douma.	.625			.560
	Looking at the photograph makes me want to donate to the victims of the conflict.	.589			.561
	When I saw the picture, I felt the urge to discuss the conflict in Douma.	.573			.422
Voyeurism	I like the picture because it gives me an insight that I normally wouldn't get.		.884		.784
	I appreciate the picture for showing me something I usually wouldn't see.		.768		.645
	In a way, I enjoy looking at the picture because it helps me get a peek into somebody's life.		.747		.649
Empathy	When seeing this photo, I can imagine what it might			.640	.771

be like if this happened to me.				
Looking at this photo, I could imagine what the person on the picture was feeling.		.849		.773
When I saw this picture, it made me feel compassionate for the person.	.640	.828		.622
Self-values (eigenvalues)	5.276	1.805	1.054	
Variance explained (%)	43.969	15.093	8.782	67.790

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = .849

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Chi-square (66) = 758.660,  $p < .01$ .

*Note:* As a preliminary assessment of the four constructs (empathy, protest, voyeurism, and apathy), factor analysis with a varimax rotation was conducted. Even though apathy and protest appear to load onto the same factor, they are oppositely loaded, thus supporting the idea of separate constructs. One is urge to act, the other is absence of urge to act. Voyeurism and empathy clearly load onto separate factors. The four theorized variables were thus retained.