

A Transnational Network Analysis of Refugees in Crisis

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Abstract

Over 3,000 articles from 2012–2022 in Spanish and English across the US, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras were manually coded to better understand how refugees in crisis were framed in both home and destination countries. This study uses a detailed frame analysis and a broad transnational network analysis to highlight each refugee attribute on the media agenda that then informs policy across nations. While there is wide variation in the immigration policies of the countries sampled, there was nearly uniform negative framing and clustering of identical negative attributes across all countries sampled. This negative transnational homogenization of news content problematizes the idea of unique journalism norms and may have profound “real world” consequences that can further stigmatize refugees throughout the Americas. This research also found that the valence of content became more negative and emotive over time. This suggests that the debate around immigration will continue and even escalate as a battleground of politics and culture—and that refugees may be portrayed even more negatively across media in the future. Given this increasing negativity and emotionality in coverage, societies may see more nationalistic—and xenophobic—immigration policies throughout the Americas and a less empathetic focus on the human rights of refugees.

Keywords

immigration policy; media; media framing; negative attributes; news coverage; policy branding; refugees

1. Introduction

Much has been written about the media coverage surrounding refugees coming into the US from Central America (CA) and Mexico (Hickerson & Dunsmore, 2016). The Remain in Mexico policy was enacted during the Trump presidency, which requires certain asylum seekers arriving by land at the US–Mexico border to

return to Mexico to await their asylum hearing. The Biden administration (2021–present) largely continues to implement these policies. These asylum hearings decide whether an individual can be classified as a migrant (someone who chooses to move) or a refugee (someone who has been forced out because of war or persecution). In analysing media content, this study will use the term “refugee” for two reasons: (a) their eventual legal status is unknown at the time of media coverage and (b) media coverage often conflates or misuses the two terms when discussing specific US government policies. While these terms have specific legal meanings, they are often used interchangeably in colloquial usage. However, this research privileges the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees distinction in terminology that argues for the use of “refugee” (rather than migrants) because using the term “migrant” ignores the need that many have for protection. As noted, this study privileges the term “refugee,” but “migrant” was also used as a search term to encapsulate as much media coverage as possible. Some research (e.g., Chattopadhyay, 2019) use the term “migrant,” while others (e.g., Hickerson & Dunsmore, 2016) rely on the term “refugee,” and some research (e.g., Parrott et al., 2019) use the two terms interchangeably. It must be noted that mediated discourses on migrants as well as discourses surrounding asylum seekers tend to be more negative than mediated discourses surrounding refugees (Muytjens & Ball, 2016). These linguistic choices influence how societies feel towards those entering and leaving a country, “who is deserving of humanitarian protection, what governments are obligated to offer, and the merits of a diverse society” (Hamlin, 2022, Evolving Terms section). This relative positivity toward refugees (rather than migrants or asylum seekers) is discussed further when contextualising findings of the media representation of refugees in the Section 8.

Most of the research examining refugees coming into the US is published in English and has originated exclusively from a North American perspective (Ehmer & Kothari, 2016) without any analysis of media in the origin country of refugees. The strong relationship between media framing and political power in global societies (Entman, 2003) strongly suggests that how an individual or group is framed in the media has “real world” effects (McCombs, 2020). Thus, media can shape how refugees interpret their home country; how those in their home country and new country view their migration to the US (Liu, 2023; Parrott et al., 2019); how refugees are viewed when they arrive (Kenix & Lopez, 2021; Llewellyn et al., 2021); and resultant policies toward refugees and migrants (Chattopadhyay, 2019).

This research explores how news media in six different countries throughout CA, Mexico, and the US portrayed refugees through a continued period of interlocking crises from 2012–2022: political instability, repression, natural disasters, climate change, gang conflicts, and economic collapse. The level of migrants and refugees surged at a number of points across the span of this study, which is demonstrated by asylum application numbers both in the US and Mexico. For example, within the ten-month period from January to October 2021, Mexico received 108,000 asylum requests; 80% more than were received during the entire six-year term of the previous Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto (BBC News, 2021).

This study investigates the attributes of refugees in media coverage across several nation-states to help understand if there are networked connections of specific attributes constructed by journalists in countries with different political stances on refugees. In doing so, this research questions the strength of journalistic norms throughout different nations. To what extent are attribute networks similar, reflecting global norms of journalism? Alternatively, to what extent do attribute networks differ, reflecting the diverse political stances and cultures within US border states as well as all of the countries that these refugees travel through?

While there is wide variation in the immigration policies of the countries sampled, this research found nearly uniform negative framing and clustering of identical negative attributes. Further, the valence of content became more negative and emotive over time. This negative transnational homogenization of news content problematizes the idea of unique journalism norms and may have profound “real world” consequences that could further stigmatize refugees throughout the Americas. Examining how refugees are covered in the media contextualizes any understanding of how immigration policy is branded in news content. This contextualisation is essential if societies are to better understand the role of media in the refugee crisis.

2. Policy Branding, the Migration Crisis, and the Role of the Media

Even when issues are not directly relevant to individual citizens, governments can influence public opinion across their populations (Alon-Barkat, 2020). Political branding attempts to facilitate trust with citizens and influence behaviour like voting for a particular party (Karens et al., 2016). Clever branding can influence an individual’s perspectives on a policy even for those not emotionally invested (Alon-Barkat, 2020). In Europe and North America, media coverage of immigration and refugee issues has been particularly potent, but interestingly the media has presented the issue in different ways depending on preferred narratives about national identity (Dolea et al., 2021). Countries which have traditionally presented themselves as having liberal asylum laws often shift media narratives of immigration policy through a branded populist reliance on national identity (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017). This has been the case in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway (Pamment et al., 2017), as well as in Canada (Bhuyan et al., 2017).

Shifting how immigration policies are branded can happen through various media channels. The current president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, issues presidential directives and executive orders via X (formerly Twitter) to help shape the branding of governmental policies. He is hoping to appeal to young Salvadorans to convince them of his earnest desire to improve the country and deter their outmigration from El Salvador (Ruiz-Alba & Mancinas-Chávez, 2020). El Salvador has historically had an outright dominance of traditional media by business groups that have propped up successive governments and failed to root out corruption and other public scandals, despite some successes (Wolf, 2019). Bukele has instead used social media to brand his policies in an effort to sidestep mainstream media. Wolf (2019) argues that journalistic practices in El Salvador are relatively unsophisticated and struggling to adjust to the rise of independent media and social media.

The media landscape in Nicaragua is shaped by the history of dictatorship, revolution, further subsequent dictatorship, and the role of radio in promoting socialism to the rural working class and indigenous populations (Artz, 2016). The strict media controls imposed in Nicaragua today make it difficult for journalists to cover issues outside of the government’s preferred branded framing of policy. Young Guatemalan men are often stereotyped by other Guatemalans as being inculcated into gang culture during their migration to, and often deportation from the US (England, 2018). Yet, much of this content surrounding immigration is ignored in place of Guatemalan newspapers preferring a sensationalist tone, with little verification of facts and a reliance on large headlines and photographs (England, 2018).

In contrast, Mexico has found that its migration policy is more dependent on the policies of the US, and brands policies through nationalist media with this added emphasis. Mexico increasingly lacks the ability to regulate migration without input or pressure from the US government (FitzGerald, 2009). This makes it difficult for the

Mexican government to brand its policies as uniquely their own and bridge the gap in expectations from its citizens (FitzGerald, 2009). However, all governments, through national and social media, aim to reassure the public that they are in control of any threats to society and the economy (Bhuyan et al., 2017). Some have gone so far as to state that government branding and media framing has become more important in politics than actual policy (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011).

3. Global Media Frames and Journalism Norms

The degree to which media are shaped by globalization or decided by domestic cultural or political influences is still a source of debate. “Networks” of media suggest that media across countries will follow other media that set an interpretation of an event (Guo et al., 2015). For example, media coverage of irregular migration has proved polarising across several disparate nations (Australia, Indonesia, Iran, the Netherlands, Sri Lanka, and Switzerland) and resulted in a networked representation that focuses on crime and border protection (McAuliffe & Koser, 2017). Yet, there are geopolitical and cultural aspects to this network effect, where countries that are culturally or politically aligned are more likely to have aligned media. Those countries which are geopolitical rivals or which are culturally dissimilar are likely to have rival interpretations, suggesting that governments have considerable ability to influence media framing of policies.

These geopolitical differences in coverage can also be due to the proximity of an issue. For example, CA newspapers were more likely to present a human interest frame if they had close proximity to migrant caravans, and an economic frame if they had more distance (Kenix & Lopez, 2021). However, other research has found that the closer refugees are in proximity, the more negative the consequences (Parrott et al., 2019). If an issue is outside the borders of a nation, news coverage in different countries frames those issues unique to local cultural and political concerns and “domesticate” international news to make content more relevant to their audience (Hafez, 2009).

Contrary to geopolitical differences in news reporting, other research posits a “universal stock of professional beliefs” (Donsbach & Klett, 1993, p. 79), which creates global similarities in media framing. Universal journalistic values include public service, objectivity, immediacy, and ethics, which then shape a normative universal journalistic practice (Brennen, 2000) over long periods of time (Karlsson et al., 2023). News coverage can extend beyond local viewpoints and follow a global template (Ehmer & Kothari, 2016). This high level of agreement on the agendas of frames and attributes in the news is advanced by the habit of journalists observing these shared norms and imitating others (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2010).

4. Transnational Network Analysis

Media outlets transmit impressions or frames to an audience by assigning attributes. “Attribute priming” connects public opinion with news, as the presentation of certain attributes in connection with individuals or groups guides audience opinion (Kim & McCombs, 2007). Issues and attributes connect in networks that reinforce and build off each other to shape the audience’s perspective (Jiang et al., 2021). People naturally connect frames that reinforce a pre-established image, such as terrorism in general and 9/11 specifically (Jiang et al., 2021). The network analysis model assumes that the salience of objects and attributes moves together from the media to the consumer and conveys network attributes according to a similar dynamic (Vu et al., 2014).

Thus, network analysis provides the overall picture that the audience draws between objects and attributes across different countries. Researchers can identify the issue with the most salience, based on how attributes connect and cluster (McCombs, 2020). The emergence of network analysis makes additional cross-national studies important. Even in recent years, there remains a consistent gap in cross-national studies (Mohammed & McCombs, 2021). This research offers an important contribution to the field by bringing together a comparison of media attributes for refugees in the US with those of Mexico and CA, which are often overlooked in English language research.

5. Research Questions

Media have the power to build a specific image of the migrant crisis that then informs policy (Bleich et al., 2015). Christoph (2012) argued that negative media coverage leads the host country to be unsympathetic and less likely to absorb migrants and refugees into their community. Yet, Malkki (1996) argued that because of homogenization within media, there is widespread dehumanization and de-historicization of refugees in mediated content. This research is interested in first ascertaining if there is any difference between the portrayal of refugees across countries:

RQ1: What are the differences, if any, between the CA portrayal of refugees, their representation in Mexico, and the representation of refugees in the US?

Chattopadhyay (2019) examined CA migrant coverage in *The New York Times* and saw mention of progressively stricter policies for unauthorised immigrants who apply for refugee status over time. When examining content over time, Chattopadhyay (2019) found that *The New York Times* increasingly referred to a new kind of migrant—consisting of families, unlike lone Mexican males from the past. This research is interested in exploring differences in coverage over time:

RQ2: What are the differences, if any, in the representation of refugees over time across all of the newspapers sampled?

Other transnational research has shown that by emphasizing certain attributes of a subject, the media influence how the public views an issue (McCombs, 1994). Framing scholars have charged that by examining attributes of an issue, one can uncover how the qualities (Jasperson et al., 1998) of an issue help create the “reality-definition function of the media” (Takeshita, 1997, p. 15) that then creates policy:

RQ3: What are the most salient attributes of refugees in the newspaper coverage of the US, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala?

RQ4: How closely will the attribute agendas of refugees in the newspapers sampled from the US (Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico), the Mexican newspaper, and the newspapers sampled from CA (Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala) correlate with one another?

Transnational network analysis theorizes that attributes can be transferred simultaneously in bundles through networks of attributes that connect with other attributes over time (Vu et al., 2014). Thus, the media tell us what and how to associate attributes together (Guo, 2013). Transnational network agenda setting argues that

the salience of interrelationships between attributes can be transferred from the media to the public:

RQ5: How closely will the attribute agendas of refugees in the newspapers sampled from the US (Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico), the Mexican newspaper, and the newspapers sampled from CA (Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala) pair with other attributes of the same valence, suggesting a strong homophily of frames?

6. Methodology

In the US, large circulation newspapers in states that border Mexico were sampled: *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Arizona Daily Star*, *Albuquerque Journal*, and *The San Antonio Express News*. This sampling was important as these states have strong interaction with refugees as they arrive. In terms of content from Mexico and the CA countries of El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, this research drew from the largest circulation news outlet accessible through Factiva or an online edition. It is important to note that due to political instability in some of these countries, some news outlets were closed down during this sample period. Therefore, in some instances, multiple outlets from these countries were sampled to draw from the entire timeframe.

The *N* per newspaper for the content included in this study was dependent on the total number of articles found that contained the terms “migrant” or “refugee” in the headlines or lead paragraph. Although this article relies on the term “refugee,” these lexical choices in search terms allowed for capturing all content about those leaving their homeland. The total number of articles within each newspaper that met these criteria was used to determine a sample size with 95% accuracy and a 5% margin of error. The randomly selected number of articles chosen in each newspaper depended on the total number in the original universal sample.

Two coders were utilised for this study, with the primary coder going through all 3,007 articles and coding them, and the second coder examining 10% of content (300 randomized articles) to ensure intercoder reliability. Media content from Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras was translated from Spanish into English with Google Translate for both coders. A further 10% of the articles that were in Spanish were coded by a Spanish speaker to ensure the reliability of the coding with the translated articles.

The coding was carried out under the definitions described in a full coding sheet. There were three sections in the coding sheet. The first section contained manifest variables examining details of the article: newspaper, region of publication, and whether the article in question was an op-ed or news report. The second section had more latent variables: overall valence of refugees, cause for immigration/refugees, responsibility for immigration/refugees, effects of immigration/refugees, article frame, use of emotive language, reasons for immigration, as well as mention of refugee valence toward home and new nation. The third section of the coding sheet contained an examination of refugee attributes and attributes of the home nation and the new nation. The coded attributes were used for the network analysis. In coding these attributes, if the given attribute was present in the article it was marked with a simple 1, and if not, as a 0.

In network analysis, “degree centrality” refers to the number of ties that a node has (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In other words, the more connections an attribute has with other attributes, the more central it is in the network. Thus, the degree of the attributes in this research refers to how connective attributes are in

the network or how often an attribute is paired with another attribute. The connection with other attributes that are of the same valence (e.g., negative attributes with negative attributes) suggests a strong homophily of attributes.

Cohen's Kappa inter-coder reliability coefficient was used to provide an indication of the coding scheme's reliability. The overall intercoder Cohen's Kappa was 0.703, suggesting a highly robust coding scheme (Krippendorff, 2004). Scott's Pi was computed at 0.734 for manifest variables, 0.642 for latent variables, and 0.687 for attributes. The Spanish speaker who coded 10% of the second coder's content also had a strong level of reliability with the non-Spanish speaker (Cohen's Kappa = 0.786), which suggested a highly robust coding scheme (Krippendorff, 2004) and gave assurances that what English-speaking coders were coding in content from Google Translate was reliable.

7. Results

In total, 45.3% of newspaper articles sampled were from the US southern border, and an almost equal 43.4% were from the countries of Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala; the remaining 11.3% of articles were from Mexico. The US southern border region sampled four newspapers: 12.4% of articles from the *Albuquerque Journal*, 12% from the *Los Angeles Times*, 9.8% from the *Arizona Daily Star*, and 11.1% from the *San Antonio Express-News*. The CA region was similar with four sampled newspapers: 11.6% of articles from Guatemala (*Prensa Libre*), 12.5% from El Salvador (*El Mundo, El Faro*), 12.3% from Honduras (*La Prensa*), and 7% from Nicaragua (*La Prensa, Article 66, La Jornada, Nueva Ya*). A total of 11.3% of articles were from Mexico (*El Financiero*).

Chi-square correlations (χ^2), one-way ANOVAS, *t* tests, Spearman rank correlations, expected values, adjusted residual scores (ASR), simple percentages, and frequencies were used to answer the stated research questions concerning differences among specific regions. Adjusted residuals, or the difference between expected and observed counts, were used to demonstrate the actual influences of any given relationship. Strong influences of a particular case of one variable on a particular case of another variable were found if adjusted residuals were ± 2 points. Cramer's *V* was relied upon to determine the strength of associations between two nominal variables. It ranges from 0 to 1 where 0 indicates no association between the two variables and 1 indicates a perfect association between the two variables.

7.1. RQ1

In general, newspaper articles tended to treat refugees negatively (46.9%) and only 27.3% of articles presented refugees positively (Table 1). Even though there was a general tendency towards negativity, there was a significant relationship between the region of publication and the overall valence of refugees/immigration [$\chi^2(6, N = 3,007) = 65.252$, Cramer's *V* = 0.104, $p \leq 0.001$]. The US was positive toward refugees more than would be expected by chance (ASR = 6.2), whereas CA was generally more negative than would be expected (-4.9).

The cause for refugees was principally seen to be the government (32.4%). Thus, coders found that nearly a third of the content presented the actions or failures of the government as being the primary contributors to the decision of the refugees to leave their home country. This could either mean that government policy was

Table 1. Region of publication.

Frame	Most frequent value overall	p-value	US	CA	Mexico
Overall valence	Negative (46.9%)	<0.001	Positive (6.2)	Negative (-4.9)	Unsure (3.7)
Cause of refugees/immigration	Government (32.4%); Individuals (29.2%)	<0.001	Government (-13.7); Individuals (-8.0)	Government (8.7); Individuals (8.2)	Government (7.8)
Responsible for refugees/immigration	Government (62.4%)	<0.001	Individuals (-7.2)	Individuals (8.5)	Government (3.2)
Effect of refugees/immigration	Negative effect (41.4%)	<0.001	Neutral (-6.7)	Neutral (5.5)	—
Article frame	Attribution of responsibility (49.6%)	<0.001	Attribution of responsibility (-10); Legality (7.9)	Attribution of responsibility (7); Legality (-5.2)	Attribution of responsibility (4.8); Legality (-4.3)
Reasons for immigration	Reasons not mentioned (40.7%)	<0.001	Need to leave violence (7.3)	Need to leave violence (-4.5); Need to leave poverty (4.1)	Need to leave violence (-4.3)
Use of emotive language	Use of emotive language (68.1%)	<0.001	Use of emotive language (2.5)	Use of emotive language (-3.0)	—
Mention of refugee valence toward the home nation	No mention of refugee valence toward the home Nation (43.6%)	<0.001	No mention of refugee valence toward the home nation (13.9)	No mention of refugee valence toward the home nation (-5.7)	No mention of refugee valence toward the home nation (-12.8)
Mention of refugee valence toward the new nation	Refugees are sad to arrive in the new nation (39.8%)	<0.001	No mention of refugee valence toward the new nation (6.6)	Refugees are sad to arrive in the new nation (4.4)	No mention of refugee valence toward the new nation (-7.4)

Note: — = Much less than would be expected by chance alone; + = much more than would be expected by chance alone.

causing instability, poverty, or violence that made people want to flee, or that governments had failed to secure their borders and encouraged the refugees to enter the country. The US presented government (ASR = -13.7) as the cause for immigration much less than would be expected by chance, whereas CA (ASR = 8.7) and Mexico (ASR = 7.8) presented government as the cause for immigration much more than would be expected [$\chi^2(10, N = 3007) = 589.03$, Cramer's $V = 0.313$, $p < 0.001$].

The government was largely seen as responsible for immigration in a commanding 62.4% of content. Therefore, coders found that the majority of content presented the government as needing to be the ones to take care of the refugees. This is opposed to refugees being responsible for themselves or private individuals or organisations such as charities, activists, churches, or civil society being expected to help refugees on arrival. The US papers stated that individuals were responsible for immigration much less than would be expected (ASR = -7.2), whereas CA newspapers stated that individuals were responsible (ASR = 8.5) and Mexican newspapers stated that the government was responsible {3.2; [$\chi^2(10, N = 3,007) = 98.087$], Cramer's $V = 0.128$, $p < 0.001$ }. The overwhelming article frame was "attribution of responsibility" at

49.6%. The frame was used in the US less than one would expect (-10.0) and more than expected in CA (7) and Mexico {4.8; [$\chi^2(12, N = 3,007) = 178.82$], Cramer's $V = 0.172, p \leq 0.001$ }.

The effect of immigration across the sample was seen to be negative at 41.4% but was less neutral than would be expected by chance in the US (-6.7) and more neutral than expected in CA {5.5; [$\chi^2(10, N = 3,007) = 75.266$], Cramer's $V = 0.112, p \leq 0.001$ }. It was very likely that there was no mention of the reasons for immigration given in the article (40.7% of articles). However, a need to leave violence was much more likely to be in US papers (7.3) than CA (-4.5) or Mexican (-4.3) newspapers [$\chi^2(10, N = 3,007) = 90.867$, Cramer's $V = 0.123, p \leq 0.001$]. Most of the articles used emotive language to discuss refugees (68.1%). While this relationship was significant, there was no strong directionality [$\chi^2(4, N = 3,007) = 73.908$, Cramer's $V = 0.111, p \leq 0.001$].

None of the articles showed a clear direction in terms of balance towards the home nation (43.6%), but it seemed clear that refugees were sad to arrive in their new nation (39.8%). The relationships among both values were strong—home nation: $\chi^2(6, N = 3,007) = 689.036$, Cramer's $V = 0.339, p \leq 0.001$; and new nation: $\chi^2(6, N = 3,007) = 212.652$, Cramer's $V = 0.188, p \leq 0.001$. The US was more likely to not mention any valence at all toward the home nation (13.9) or the new nation (6.6) whereas the sentiment in Mexico was the opposite (-12.8 and -7.4). CA newspapers in this sample were less likely to not mention any valence toward the home nation (-5.7) and were more likely to state that refugees were sad to arrive in the new nation (4.4). These differences between regions were significant but moderate. The variable of being sad to arrive was determined by whether the article mentioned that migrants expressed a sense of despair at their situation when they arrived at the US border due to their treatment by border agents, the asylum process, or general living conditions while they were awaiting their asylum hearing.

Most of the inter-relationships measured between the region of publication and the frames measured were found to be moderate. The only outlier was a mention of refugee valence toward the home nation (Cramer's $V = 0.339$) and the causes for immigration (Cramer's $V = 0.313$).

7.2. RQ2

Every chi-square test was significant between time and how refugees were framed throughout the time measured (2012–2022; Table 2). One-way ANOVA tests were conducted for variables that were ordered for means testing. Overall valence, use of emotive language, and the time of publication were all found to be significant at <0.001 . A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean overall valence of coverage (negative to positive) between at least two groups over time ($F(1,2996) = [20.215], p \leq 0.001$); it also revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean emotive language coverage (no use to use) between at least two groups over time ($F(1,2996) = [9.550], p = 0.002$). The ANOVA means plots demonstrated that media coverage of refugees became more negative (lower score) over the 11-year sample period (Figure 1) and more emotive (higher score) over time (Figure 2).

Table 2. Refugee framing over time.

Frame	p-value	Cramer's V	Pearson chi-square value	Degrees of freedom
Overall valence	<0.001	0.137	56.241	6
Cause of refugees/immigration	<0.001	0.115	79.941	10
Responsible for refugees/immigration	0.003	0.095	26.865	10
Effect of refugees/immigration	<0.001	0.121	87.853	10
Article frame	<0.001	0.123	90.874	12
Reasons for immigration	<0.001	0.097	56.138	10
Use of emotive language	<0.001	0.100	60.230	4
Mention of refugee valence toward the home nation	<0.001	0.195	229.441	6
Mention of refugee valence toward the new nation	<0.001	0.108	70.382	6

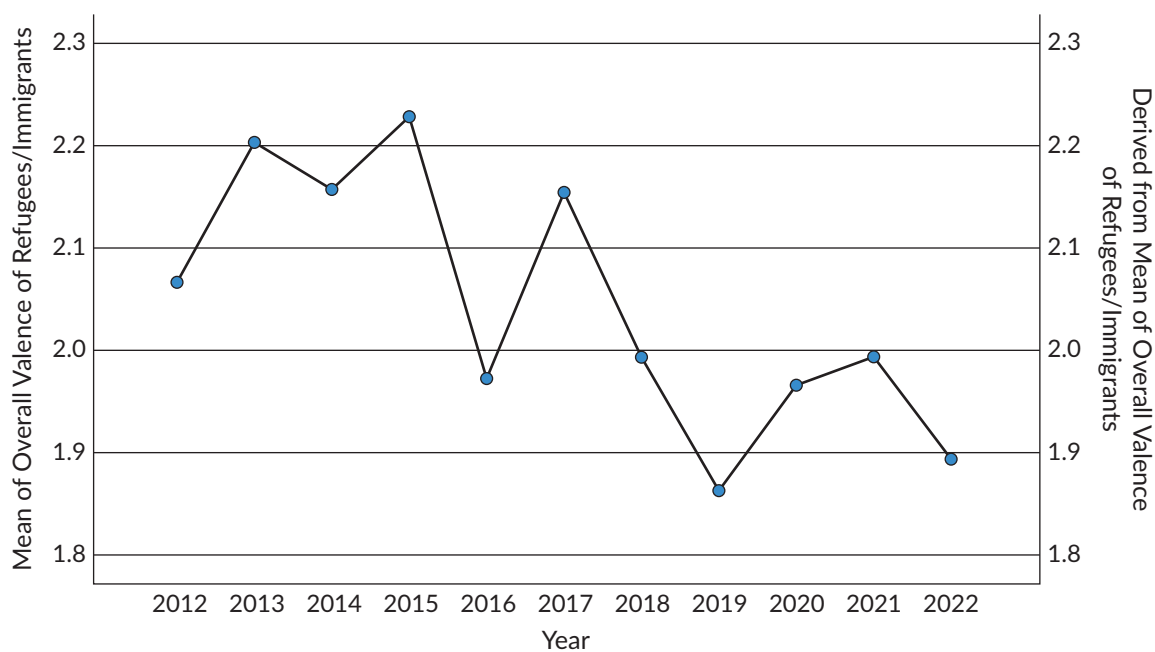


Figure 1. Mean of the overall valence of refugees over time.

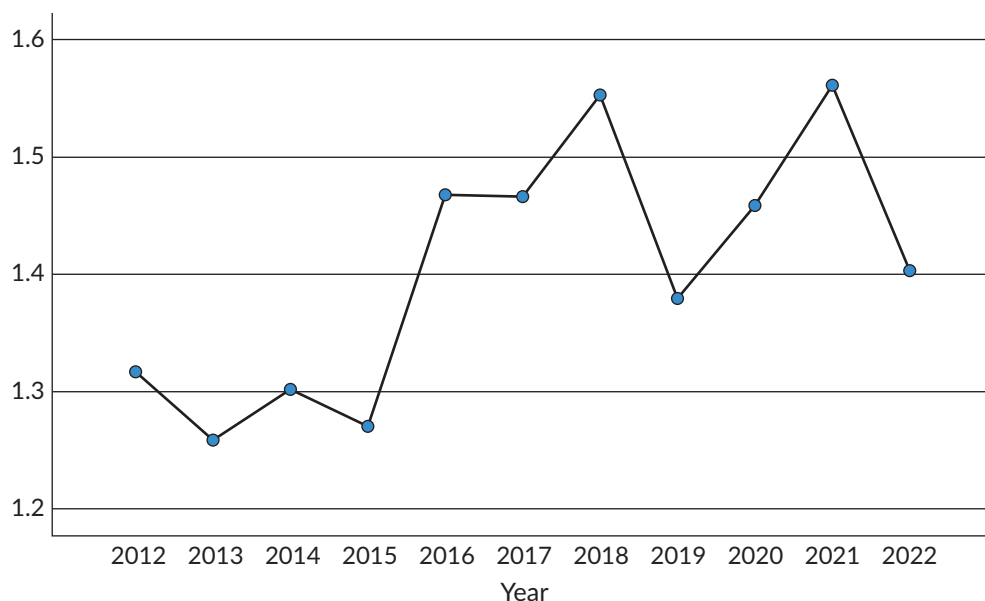


Figure 2. Mean of use of emotive language over time.

7.3. RQ3

The top three attributes (from 30 possible attributes) were found to be exactly the same across the three regions sampled. Refugees were described with the attributes “targeted by authorities,” “biased leadership,” and “safety” (Tables 3, 4, and 5). An article was coded with the attribute “targeted by authorities” if there was mention of the authorities deliberately or disproportionately targeting refugees. If the article discussed political leaders as having a biased perspective against refugees more broadly and already taking a position against refugees, then the article was coded as “biased leadership.” An article was coded with the attribute “safety” if there was mention of a situation that threatened the safety of the refugees or if safety was mentioned as a motivating factor for refugees to move.

7.4. RQ4

Spearman’s rank correlation was computed to assess the relationship between attribute rankings of the US newspapers, the Mexican newspapers, and the CA newspapers (Table 3). There was a positive and significant correlation between the US and CA, $r(11) = (0.76984037)$, $p = (0.002)$. The relationship between the attribute rankings in the US newspapers and the attribute rankings from Mexico was moderately strong, but not significant $r(11) = (0.53343534)$, $p = (0.060)$. Finally, the relationship between attribute rankings of Mexican newspapers and the attributes of the Central American newspapers was positive and significant, $r(11) = (0.71664008)$, $p = (0.005)$.

Table 3. Most salient attributes and their ranks in all three regions.

Attributes	US southern border		CA		Mexico	
	Rank	N	Rank	N	Rank	N
Targeted by authorities***	1	916	1	744	1	189
Biased leadership***	2	878	2	669	2	184
Safety*	3	723	3	575	3	143
Looking out for family*	4	634	5	451	4	89
Traumatized***	5	557	4	517	6	73
Desperate***	6	524	8	241	15	28
Discriminated***	7	465	6	317	9	66
Asylum*	8	450	12	184	11	53
Bargaining chip***	9	375	10	219	7	56
Profiled***	10	338	13	135	12	32
Legal status**	11	311	9	232	10	54
Better wages/more opportunities**	14	209	7	265	8	61
Human rights*	12	236	11	218	5	75

Notes: * = Positive attribute; ** = Neutral attribute; *** = Negative attribute.

7.5. RQ5

One can see that the coordinates for refugees' attributes are predominantly negative (Tables 4 and 6). Indeed, 66% of the most paired refugee attributes found were negative. The attribute with the highest degree was the negative attribute of "biased leadership" (degree = 7), followed by another negative attribute of "targeted

Table 4. The highest refugee attribute correlates.

N	Attributes	
1,381	Targeted by authorities***	Biased leadership***
891	Targeted by authorities***	Safety*
783	Traumatized***	Safety*
780	Biased leadership***	Safety*
717	Biased leadership***	Looking out for family*
714	Targeted by authorities***	Looking out for family*
708	Biased leadership***	Discriminated***
702	Safety*	Looking out for family*
676	Targeted by authorities***	Discriminated***
610	Targeted by authorities***	Traumatized***
591	Biased leadership***	Bargaining chip***
562	Biased leadership***	Traumatized***
519	Traumatized***	Desperate***
512	Biased leadership***	Asylum*
509	Targeted by authorities***	Desperate***

Notes: * = Positive attribute; ** = Neutral attribute; *** = Negative attribute.

by authorities” (degree = 6; Tables 5 and 6). The negative attributes of “biased leadership” and “targeted by authorities” were the most commonly paired in this sample (1,381 times). There is a strong homophily of frames (Table 3) in each geographical region, which demonstrates that negative attributes are very commonly paired with other negative attributes throughout this sample (Figure 3).

Table 5. Degree of frames: Most paired refugee attributes.

Attributes	N
Biased leadership***	7
Targeted by authorities***	6
Safety*	4
Traumatized***	4
Looking out for family*	3
Discriminated***	2
Desperate***	2
Asylum*	1
Bargaining chip***	1

Notes: * = Positive attribute; ** = Neutral attribute; *** = Negative attribute.

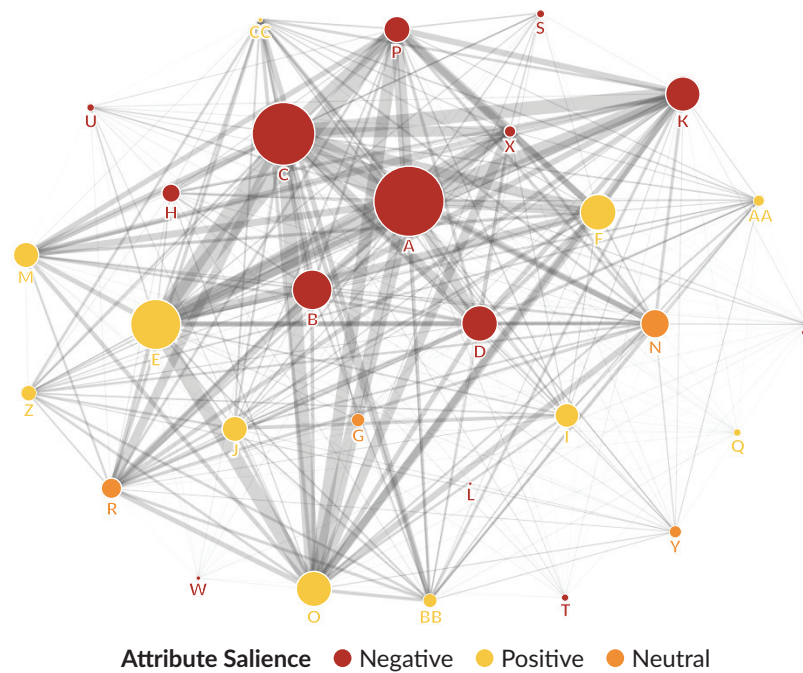


Figure 3. Network analysis of refugee attributes.

Table 6. Media agenda of refugee attributes in media coverage from the US southern border (New Mexico, California, Arizona, Texas), CA (Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala), and Mexico.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA	BB	CC	DD	
A***																															
B***	453																														
C***	1,381	446																													
D***	473	142	591																												
E*	891	212	780	270																											
F*	490	115	512	206	432																										
G**	61	29	58	15	41	15																									
H***	118	87	132	30	65	38	5																								
I*	73	29	86	28	90	52	15	9																							
J*	93	35	120	40	91	51	15	10	167																						
K***	676	304	708	237	421	242	33	145	50	61																					
L***	6	6	7	2	4	1	1	7	0	0	7																				
M*	363	101	355	133	252	173	7	30	17	15	155	0																			
N**	257	75	288	120	213	86	12	32	58	102	158	1	70																		
O*	714	181	717	246	702	410	24	64	125	165	370	5	217	318																	
P***	610	142	562	165	783	346	14	50	75	80	313	4	271	158	636																
Q*	14	9	21	8	9	6	2	4	14	16	15	0	1	12	14	2															
R**	400	164	451	191	195	133	32	33	42	63	218	1	112	148	254	134	15														
S***	76	22	66	30	62	34	0	7	1	1	21	0	63	10	48	77	0	16													
T***	35	19	38	14	19	10	1	6	2	3	21	0	4	9	10	6	0	6	1												
U***	76	23	65	24	78	32	1	11	3	5	32	0	7	27	43	41	1	20	1	31											
V***	41	23	51	18	23	7	1	10	2	5	29	0	10	18	22	10	2	17	1	16	18										
W***	21	14	24	10	13	5	0	7	3	4	12	0	4	10	13	4	2	8	0	10	13	24									
X***	509	151	500	171	477	300	12	37	55	54	250	2	234	156	485	519	3	134	70	9	26	10	3								
Y**	42	31	58	17	25	6	6	7	29	34	31	0	16	57	54	19	5	42	0	1	6	10	2	23							
Z*	89	55	130	49	68	26	9	29	79	113	78	1	20	121	133	50	7	80	1	2	3	8	6	32	49						
AA*	72	41	82	33	66	29	12	15	86	95	44	0	21	56	106	56	10	49	4	1	2	7	3	49	46	98					
BB*	165	85	215	85	102	39	21	34	72	95	146	3	23	108	167	69	23	157	2	2	5	10	6	38	50	133	83				
CC*	174	92	229	91	116	55	21	35	73	95	142	3	29	118	179	82	22	165	2	2	8	12	8	56	60	138	86	266			
DD*	15	9	15	3	17	6	1	7	26	27	16	0	3	19	31	12	6	17	2	0	1	2	0	6	18	23	27	32	34		

Notes: * = Positive attribute; ** = Neutral attribute; *** = Negative attribute; A = Targeted by authorities; B = Profiled; C = Biased leadership; D = Bargaining chip; E = Safety; F = Asylum; G = Sanctuary; H = Racism; I = Charitable; J = Generous; K = Discriminated; L = Colourism; M = Human rights; N = Better wages/more opportunities; O = Looking out for family; P = Traumatized; Q = Open-minded; R = Legal status; S = Passive and deprived of agency; T = Takers and not givers; U = Opportunities; V = Outside local culture; W = Unwilling to join local culture; X = Desperate; Y = Active and with agency; Z = Givers and not takers; AA = Altruistic; BB = Inside local culture; CC = Willing to join local culture; DD = Jovial.

8. Discussion

Over the course of this study, more than 3,000 articles from the US, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras were coded over 11 years, from 2012–2022. The number of articles coded over time demonstrates the consistency with which migration appears as a topic of crisis in media outlets in the US, Mexico, and CA. Indeed, the only time the coverage slowed in more recent years was during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which a much greater crisis dominated the attention of the entire world. This research project makes important contributions to the study of immigration policy perspectives outside the confines of the US, an omission of much of the English-speaking research that could be found.

As discussed, there is wide variation in the branding of immigration policies in national media across the nations sampled for this research. This variation mirrors the difference in the immigration policies of the countries sampled. Honduras has the most restrictive immigration policy as it does not issue work permits for asylum seekers (Human Rights First, 2020). Over the sample period, it appeared that neither Guatemala nor Honduras granted resettlement to refugees and El Salvador for only 14 individuals (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). Mexico naturalised a relatively scant 217 individuals, while the US resettled 504,870 individuals from 2012–2022. At first glance, these divergent policies combined with the homophily of frames may suggest that there is little relationship between media coverage of refugees and government policies towards them.

The extensive data in this study demonstrated that refugees generally received negative coverage, that the most salient (negative) attributes were common across all the countries in the study, and that these negative attributes were overwhelmingly clustered together. Of the negative attributes, 66% of those were paired together with other negative attributes. For the most part, news media across countries shared these negative attributes of refugees. The general portrait of refugees was people being targeted by authorities and fearing for their safety while being used for political purposes by biased leaders. Taken together, the clustered attributes suggest that coverage was not only negative, but refugees were at the whim of biased authorities throughout all of the geographical areas sampled. If the study used only the search term “migrant” to collect articles for analysis, rather than “migrant” and “refugee” as search terms, previous research (Muytjens & Ball, 2016) suggests that the representation found in this study would have been even more negative. This is striking given the majority of articles already presenting refugees negatively. This type of negative framing can have profound “real world” consequences that can stigmatize refugees: victimization, dehumanization, and marginalization (Pandir, 2020). Negative portrayals of migrants have been demonstrated to generate physiological and emotional hostility (Conzo et al., 2021). A lack of empathy toward refugees in media coverage can move societal discussions away from human rights and toward xenophobia.

The most common frame that emerged in this study was the attribution of blame and the attribution of responsibility. This implies that media coverage of refugees assumes that refugees are problems for whom someone is responsible, either for driving them out or for looking after them. Therefore, it should be little wonder that the coverage tends to be negative, as the starting point of the coverage is a source of problems. There were, however, subtle differences in coverage between media in US border states, Mexico, and CA, which do correlate to refugee policies in these countries. At a more granular level, the Central American papers were more likely to blame governments and individuals together, while US papers focused blame on

the government. This makes sense if one considers that refugees generally originate in CA—thus, individuals are more responsible as it is individuals who are emigrating. Conversely, refugees generally enter the US so governmental policy dictates how refugees are treated. Thus, even though there was a marked difference here between regions, this difference was based on specific differences in refugee behaviour in each region, differences which also account for different policies.

Another insight is that US papers were more likely to say that refugees' reason for leaving their home country was to flee violence. In contrast, Central American papers had a wider variety of stated reasons for the refugees to leave. This is a key difference as far as the policy discussion is concerned. For audiences in the US, violence was a more compelling reason to accept refugees than other reasons such as poverty or economic disadvantage. Central American news outlets discussed these other reasons for refugees, and generally have much more restrictive policies. If one presumes that governments are solely willing to accept those people fleeing violence, and not those wanting to escape poverty, there is a clear reason for Central American outlets to discuss a wide range of motivations, reflecting comparatively tougher policies. This disparity across regions could also be the result of relative proximity. As Mohammed and McCombs (2021) suggest, the prestige media of the Global North tend to report on “peripheral” countries in terms of disaster and catastrophe, as opposed to a variety of events which may include disasters but also mundane occurrences, such as young people from poorer countries wanting to pursue wealth or exciting careers. In truth, the human experience runs along a whole spectrum of disaster and triumph, and those news outlets which are closer to human stories are more likely to capture that aspect of human nature. This might mean that the citizens of Central American countries are more critical of the reasons refugees or migrants are making their journey because they have a closer understanding of why people choose to leave, rather than purely through the lens of catastrophe.

Future research should continue to ascertain the effects of proximity on a mediated issue in framing or public opinion. Although there appears to be comparatively scarce public opinion data for the Central American countries, the results of this research suggest that the movement of refugees across CA and Mexico was presented as somewhat controversial in those countries' media outlets. The fact that all newspapers generally had negative valence towards refugees is indicative of this fact. This would be one clear area for further research in order to gain insights into Latin American perspectives on a perennial topic of concern for politicians and voters across Mexico, the US, and CA.

Overall, media outlets in this research attempted to humanize the refugees, but the perspectives differed, which made it difficult to measure the resulting data. For example, newspapers in both the US and CA often mentioned refugees being victims of human trafficking, through the infamous practice of “coyote” smugglers. However, US-based papers tended to focus on the victims and their plight, whereas when Central American papers documented this phenomenon, they presented a sense of outrage at the perpetrators. This also suggests a harder line in terms of policy among Central American countries, where anger or deterrence may matter more than sympathy from US audiences. However these subtle variations were difficult to convey across a study of more than 3,000 articles, and this was a clear limitation of the methodology. Future research should qualitatively examine transnational content with more specificity in frames.

Although slight differences across countries were found, this research found widespread homophily in media attributes and framing across all countries sampled. Future research should examine why there was little

balance found between positive and negative attributes. For example, asylum, charitableness, and human rights were almost never found in the sample and were very rarely paired with another attribute. These disparities point to an imbalanced journalism that portrayed refugees negatively across nation-states with profoundly different aims of immigration policies. Refugees were portrayed uniformly as a “problem” that needed to be solved by governments. These “problems” require specific policy solutions, as branded, communicated, and framed by different local media to the unique immigration situations in each nation. Yet, that was not the case in this study. Refugees were largely seen as a negative influence on societies throughout the countries sampled. The 11-year time scale of this study revealed two interesting trends: first, the valence became more negative over time, and second, emotive language became more common. This suggests that the debate around immigration will continue and even escalate as a battleground of politics and culture—and that refugees will be portrayed even more negatively across media in CA, Mexico, and the US. Given this increasing negativity and emotionality in coverage, societies may see more nationalistic—and xenophobic—immigration policies throughout the Americas.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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