Abstract

Visual depictions of asylum seekers and refugees have recently gained even more prominence in public discourses. Images disseminated in the media have a potentially significant influence on public opinion, especially in relation to polemic discourses surrounding asylum seekers and refugees in times of crisis. This paper provides a visual analysis of four key images that emerged in the media in 2015, documenting the precarious Syrian refugee movements in Europe. We looked at recent trends in the media focusing on shifts in visual representations of asylum seekers during that time. The themes from our analysis suggest that the poignancy (and therefore effectiveness) of the photographs lies in the fact that they differed vastly from the abundant and stereotypical depictions of asylum seekers and refugees usually documented in the media or discussed in academic literature. Visual analysis represents a creative research approach to seeking nuanced understandings of lived experiences and complex issues.

Keywords: Visual representations, refugees, asylum seekers, media, policy, public opinion.
social media, but very few research approaches evaluate the impact of those images on the nation’s psyche or on changes in government policy. Considering that 2015 was particularly full with forced displacement stories of Syrian asylum seekers and refugees, and visual depictions of their precarious situations in Europe, we asked ourselves whether images widely circulated across the world on their circumstances could shift government policy and the Australian public’s largely negative conceptualisations of asylum seekers and refugees (see Martin, 2015; Sulaiman-Hill, Thompson, Afsar & Hodliffe, 2011). This paper provides a visual analysis of four key images that emerged in the second half of 2015 documenting the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe. We looked at recent trends through this analysis although the themes discussed in relation to these photographs are not necessarily representative of current media depictions in general. Rather, our aim in this research endeavour was to look for shifts in visual representations of asylum seekers in times of crisis.

The themes from our analysis suggest that the poignancy (and therefore effectiveness) of the photographs lies in the fact that they differed vastly from the abundant and stereotypical depictions of asylum seekers and refugees usually documented in the media or discussed in academic literature. That poignancy was exactly what propelled these photographs into international media networks and social media for wide distribution. This paper’s argument is twofold: (i) The ‘viral’ nature of such images represents a fundamental shift towards a more humanitarian policy response to refugees (however brief); and (ii) The visual analysis and theorising presented here adds richness and complexity to the overwhelmingly narrow and dehumanising mainstream representations of refugees. The usefulness of the research method employed suggests its potential towards triggering more socially just responses to refugee crises, including through policy.

**Background**

The topic of refugees and asylum seekers is socio-politically complex in most countries and has been garnering increased media coverage particularly in 2015 and 2016. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] estimates that there are currently over 59 million persons forcibly displaced both domestically and internationally (UNHCR, 2015). More than half of any refugee population is under the age of 18 (Villarreal, 2004), with increasing numbers of children either seeking asylum as unaccompanied minors, or separated from their parents during the journey across multiple borders (Saenen, 2015). Forced migration shows no signs of slowing down, with a multitude of conflicts around the globe intensifying, and both global warming and a steep decline of resources poised to be leading causes of forced migration in the future (Klare, 2001).
In Australia, polarised public opinions on the nation’s obligations, policies and international responsibilities regarding asylum seekers in particular (see for instance O’Doherty & Lecouteur, 2007) are often expressed publicly through media outlets, online posts, social media, or during protests in capital cities. This complex situation has implications considering the Australian Government’s 2015 announcement that it will welcome 12,000 Syrian refugees for resettlement in response to the large influx of asylum seekers in European countries (Bourke, 2015). Indeed, the global refugee crisis has reached epic proportions in 2015; the Syrian refugee situation in Europe has been referred to as a global crisis, and the most significant situation of forced displacement since World War II (Alfred, 2015). Concurrently, many international bodies including the United Nations as well as non-government organisations agree that current asylum seeker policies in Australia are not sound, appropriate, or sufficient (Basham, 2015). With a crisis of such proportions, representatives on both sides of the debate, impassioned about this issue for many years, are grappling with the harsh realities of forced displacement in a global refugee regime of closed borders.

For displaced persons fleeing conflict and persecution, there are many social, political, health or gender issues (to name but a few) already facing asylum seekers prior to the difficulties they experience during attempts to relocate to a safer place (see for instance Bartolomei, Eckert & Pittaway, 2014). Still, many countries favour policies that deter or detain rather than assist those seeking asylum. In Australia, as well as the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Greece, or Sweden, government agencies imprison those seeking asylum while they process claims for refugee status (Amnesty International, 2015; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2015; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2004). Furthermore, the detrimental effects of detention is widely documented (Barnes, 2003; Bosworth, 2014; Coffey, Kaplan, Sampson & Tucci, 2010; Lenette et al., 2015; Villarreal, 2004) as are the mental and physical health issues, poor conditions, and lack of services for asylum seekers living in detention and the wider community (Basham, 2015; Coffey et al., 2010; Corbett, Gunasekera, Maycock & Isaacs, 2014; Paxton, Cherian & Zwi, 2015).

Visual Representations

Amidst such a complex situation, visual depictions of asylum seekers and refugees have recently gained even more prominence in public discourses (see Lenette, 2016) that aim to address the seemingly hopeless situations facing several European countries as mainly Syrian women, children and men attempt to reach safety while the situation worsens in their home country; for instance, Merelli and Hu (2015) have argued that some of these photographs (including Figure 2 discussed in this paper) changed how the world saw the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. Aus-
tralia, despite its distant geographical location from the epicentre of the crisis, cannot remain immune to the impact of such visual depictions, considering that photographs documenting the hardships and tragedy unfolding kilometres away can be distributed and viewed within hours through online news media outlets and social media.

Additionally, the small body of work examining visual representations of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia (for example Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison & Nicholson, 2013; Szörényi 2006; Wright, 2000; 2002) focuses on discourse analysis in print media, with a smaller proportion focusing on visual representations in the media (Lenette, 2016). Since the resettlement of Bosnian refugees in the mid-1990s (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003), the way refugees are imagined in the Australian psyche and illustrated in media stories tends to intersect with deep-seated colonial and racist histories and stereotypes. Literature focusing on media articles highlights that Australian print media has historically depicted asylum seekers and refugees negatively, framing them (explicitly or implicitly) as diseased, primitive, criminal, cunning, threatening, dehumanised ‘others’, and attempting to infiltrate and alter the Australian ‘way of life’ (Klocker & Dunn, 2003; McKay et al., 2011; Martin, 2015; Nolan, Farquharson, Politoff & Marjoribanks 2011; O’Doherty & Lecouteur 2007; Schweitzer et al., 2005; Sulaiman-Hill et al., 2011). The limited visual analyses on the same topics identify similar tropes and stereotypes continuously represented in images published by Australian mainstream media outlets (Bleiker et al., 2013; Szörényi, 2006; Wright, 2000; 2002). Importantly, the images we initially evaluated before selecting the four photographs for this study featured a number of common themes, which matched the key themes discussed on depictions of asylum seekers and refugees in the literature, including:

- Women depicted as vulnerable mothers with children or babies (“Madonna and Child” pose), and feminisation of refugee representations;
- Recurring images of children, often with dirty or ripped clothing;
- Unidentifiable masses or processions of people;
- People with obscured or out of focus faces;
- Subdued facial expressions;
- Lack of easily identifiable focal point;
- Military personnel and warfare equipment; and
- Desolate settings. (Bleiker et al., 2013; Johnson, 2011; Szörényi, 2006; Wright 2000; 2002).
Why Visual Analysis?

Visual research can provide platforms different to textual analysis for sharing experiences that remain at the margins (Delgado, 2015; Lenette & Boddy, 2013) and as such, can provide an innovative avenue to understand the complex lived experiences of asylum seekers and refugees (Lenette, 2016). Photographs as a medium can be particularly powerful tools for social change as they have the ability to elicit strong and emotional responses from the public (Cao, 2010; Wright, 2000) to influence and inform policy reform and potentially improve the lives of those depicted (Cao, 2010). Our intent was to adopt a less common research approach to provide insights on the complex events relating to the Syrian refugee crisis. We undertook this analysis in the context of a social research and policy program at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, as scholars with a commitment to social justice and to research methods that endeavour to convey narratives that are often overlooked.

As our global cultural practices continually shift into a digital age, visual media has become increasingly pervasive (Wright, 2000; 2002). In recent years, consumers of news items have begun to rely more heavily on information in a visual format, which is largely perceived to be more authentic or truthful than textual forms (Huss, 2013; Stanczak, 2007). This is partly due to the fact that, with the advent of personal and affordable devices such as digital cameras and smartphones, most people now document and share their experiences visually for them to be considered legitimate. This phenomenon is perhaps best embodied in the millennial phrase “Pics or it didn’t happen” which was recently described as “the mantra of the Instagram era” (Silverman, 2015). In a broader sense, we have undergone a sociocultural shift towards communication via images alone. With the ubiquity of websites and applications such as Instagram, Emoji, Snapchat, Facebook and Tumblr, among other socio-technological developments, visual means have become an unquestionable contemporary medium of communication.

It is not surprising then, that visual depictions, particularly as disseminated in the media, have a potentially significant influence on public opinions, especially in relation to discourses and views surrounding asylum seekers and refugees in times of crisis (Bleiker et al., 2013; Martin, 2015; Szörényi, 2006; Wright, 2000; 2002). In this context, visual analysis as a research approach is useful to illuminate the experiences of groups often marginalised and overlooked, including women, children and people in vulnerable positions (Kenney, 2009) such as asylum seekers and refugees in precarious situations across the globe. However, it is acknowledged from the outset that visual analysis may risk falling short in attempting to address certain implicit meanings or themes that can only be expressed in text-based sources (Pink, 2011, cited in Bryman, 2012). Visual analysis remains nev-
Nevertheless a creative research approach to seeking nuanced understandings of lived experiences to develop further knowledge on complex issues.

**Methodology**

This research aimed to examine examples of visual representations of Syrian asylum seekers in the media in late 2015 by analysing four photographs documenting their journeys to European countries. The photographs were analysed using Collier’s (2004, p. 40) “open viewing” to describe the themes apparent in each depiction; open viewing involves immersion in the photographs to allow visual depictions to “speak” to viewers. The themes from this analysis were then compared and contrasted with the findings of scholarly articles on media representations of asylum seekers and refugees in mainstream Australian media, to add to understandings of how visual depictions of Syrian refugees fit in the Australian psyche and the nation’s constructions of asylum seeking and forced displacement.

**Sampling**

The four images chosen were widely publicised in international media outlets, social media, as well as Australian print media in 2015. These photographs were accompanied by contextual information (sources, location, news stories and captions), which was useful to situate the experiences depicted; however, the photographs were considered as stand-alone representations of the refugee crisis for the purpose of this analysis. The process of selecting the pictures was a form of reconnaissance research by surveying popular and prominent media websites and image databases for relevant depictions. This approach helped us ascertain what sources presented images related to the topic and how frequently this occurred in the media or through public outlets. While information presented through visual depictions must be viewed critically (Stanczak, 2007), potential bias was not our concern here. We purposely used a visual research approach as an opportunity to reflect on the misconstrued representations of asylum seekers and refugees and our role and responsibility as researchers to use methods that deconstruct the unethical and dehumanising impacts of such dominant depictions, particularly in polemic political contexts.

**Ethics and limitations**

Several ethical considerations can emerge in visual analysis, including informed consent, image source and context, and the safety of those depicted due to the identifiable nature of the data (Bryman, 2012; Delgado, 2015; Pink, 2013). These issues become even more pressing in relation to vulnerable populations who may not have agency or any means to protect their identities, avoid the repercussions of being depicted in visual data, or communicate their non-consent (Delgado,
2015; Kenney, 2009; Lenette, 2016). However, such considerations are negated when examining extant photographs in a secondary data analysis process where images are mediated through another source. Additionally, there is always a risk of images being misinterpreted; however, given that sufficient contextual information was provided with the photographs chosen for this analysis, that risk was relatively low. The research did not include a critical discourse analysis of the accompanying text as the focus was solely on the visual data as representations of discourses at play. Only a small number of photographs were purposefully analysed in-depth, so the scope of this research is fairly limited and it risks addressing only a small portion of relevant issues. Nevertheless, visual analysis provides a creative avenue to make sense of complex issues like the global refugee crisis currently unfolding and should be considered, alongside other research methods, as a valuable source of knowledge.

Results

The analysis of four selected photographs showed that the depictions did not follow the clichéd image template of dominant themes in the literature outlined above. Images such as the photograph of Laith Majid and his children’s safe arrival in Kos, Greece in August 2015 (Figure 1), and of the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi washed up on the shores of a Turkish beach in September 2015 (Figure 2), both appear to have ‘gone viral’ precisely because they were not like the images of asylum seekers and refugees typically shown in mainstream media.

The photograph of Laith Majid depicts a father clutching his two young children, his visibly anguished face the clear focal point of the photograph. The anguish may be a result of the uncertainty of embarking on a dangerous voyage across the sea with his children to a place of safety, mixed with intense relief at having reached the point of destination safe and well and without any major incident. The small group of people in the background (not intentionally obscured even though they are out of focus) seems to be salvaging belongings from the water, while Laith Majid clings on to his children as his emotions take over. This highlights the poignancy of the situation as the father embraces his children once they reach the shores of safety. There is no visible military presence although the asylum seekers emerged from the open ocean, adding to the sense of relief at having arrived to destination safely.

One notable observation is that this photograph challenges the dominant feminisation of visual depictions of refugees usually employed to trigger viewers’ sympathy (see Johnson, 2011). Instead of focussing on the vulnerability of a refugee woman – usually represented as a mother with a child, this photograph portrays fatherhood as a central theme of asylum seeking, which has become quite rare in dominant depictions. This focus also challenges discourses of refugee men
Figure 1: Laith Majid and his children arriving in Kos, Greece. Source: *Sydney Morning Herald* (2015).

Figure 2: The body of Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach. Source: *The Guardian* (2015)
as illegal and threatening, as this man’s vulnerability, emotions, and protective side are purposely emphasised.

The now infamous image of three-year old Aylan Kurdi’s lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach has been arguably the most poignant and powerful image to emerge in the media at the peak of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. Aylan’s bright red shirt and blue shorts are juxtaposed with the light colours of the sea foam and beach, making his body the focal point of the photograph – even though it only constitutes a small proportion of the frame. A Turkish officer stands above Aylan, overshadowing his small figure; despite his military appearance, the officer is not depicted as an oppositional force or threatening. In the background, it seems that garbage has washed ashore, making it even more emotionally wrenching to see the dead body of a toddler amidst the debris.

The vulnerability of this child (and by extension, of asylum seekers who embark on perilous journeys with their families) and the tragic end to his life captured in this photograph can be seen as a plea to witness his death; indeed, it is quite rare that images of asylum seekers who die during perilous journeys across borders are publicised – let alone when the photograph depicts a toddler who drowned. In that way, the wide dissemination of photographs showing Aylan’s dead body is quite unique. This set of photographs was published and circulated

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1. In another photograph, the officer is seen gently cradling Aylan’s limp body and removing it from the beach.
specifically to show the reality of Syrian asylum seekers as they made their way to European countries, to highlight the tragedy and consequences of closed borders and inaction on the part of nations. Aylan’s photographs triggered worldwide sympathy and outrage at the crisis unfolding, and arguably was the tipping point at which European nations enacted policy and took urgent action to manage the flow of asylum seekers. Rather than cultivate moral panic in relation to asylum seekers (see Martin, 2015), reactions to this photograph stemmed from a worldwide responsibility to prevent such tragic outcomes.

Another set of photographs that defied conventional visual depictions of asylum seekers are the images of unnamed Syrian refugee children reacting to tear gas inhalation at the Hungarian border (Figures 3 and 4). The close-up framing of these photographs offers no relief for those wishing to look away, as these two young children are visibly suffering. The knowledge that children have been tear-gassed by Hungarian border officials as a means to control large crowds of asylum seekers to prevent them from crossing the border explains the source of the discernible pain on their faces. This intense suffering, juxtaposed with their vulnerability as children portrayed alone in this precarious context, is palpable in these photographs.

The focus on children as identifiable focal points (although they are not named) challenges the dehumanising approach of depicting asylum seekers and refugees as “masses” of unidentifiable people (Johnson, 2011). While the use of refugee children’s photographs in precarious and desolate situations is fairly common, there is little focus on the children’s surrounds here: the emphasis is on their suffering while they are in limbo and denied access to a place of safety. The issue of refusing vulnerable individuals and families the right to cross borders to seek asylum, and using pain-inducing means to achieve this aim, raises concerns for the wellbeing of asylum seeker children and their families. The unnecessary suffering caused by border officials offers a different and unique perspective into the children’s reality.

**Discussion**

The images analysed here were different in their portrayal of asylum seekers because the focus was on individuals who were visually identifiable and depicted as non-threatening; the framing of these pictures reinforces the unnecessary suffering – and tragic outcomes – that can be integral to asylum seeking in crisis situations, and this contributes to the poignancy of the photographs. This is precisely what made the images go ‘viral’: they offered nuanced perceptions that dominant visual representations often fail to do.

In the past, visual depictions of asylum seekers have shown masses of unidentifiable people that dehumanise them, to dilute any compassion felt for “boat
people” for instance, and to emphasise a “threat” of waves of unfamiliar bodies lapping at our shores (Bleiker et al., 2013; Johnson, 2011; Wright, 2000). This is challenged in the images analysed here, as individuals are clearly identifiable as focal points. The presence of military personnel and police and prison-like settings often frame asylum seekers as illegal or criminals regardless of their actions or true purpose (Bleiker et al., 2013; Wright, 2002). That element is also absent from the four photographs we analysed. Furthermore, images set in foreign environments and depicting people in tattered clothing can create a distance between such a reality and that of westerners, reinforcing deep-seated racist notions of the primitive ‘other’ (Bleiker et al., 2013) as diseased, uneducated and impossible to assimilate (Wright 2000; 2002). Such images can elicit oppositional but similarly damaging concepts, such as the helpless, emaciated “child in need” that can act as “poverty porn” to western sensibilities, invoking the need for “rescuing”. While these aspects can elicit sympathy on the part of western viewers, it also means that such depictions allow viewers to comfortably imagine poverty as an offshore, distant hardship. The framing of Figures 2, 3, and 4 in particular indicate a different intent, as the themes discussed focus on children’s unnecessary suffering in circumstances that could be prevented focus on children’s unnecessary suffering in circumstances that could be prevented through political action.

The analysis suggests that in recent times, visual representations of asylum seekers and refugees have focused more directly on individuals or small groups rather than faceless seas of bodies, with as a result, a greatly humanising effect. The consequences of military action are often shown (as in Figures 3 and 4), but the military presence itself is not emphasised. More recent photographs like Figure 1 depict close ups of the anguish-stricken faces of women, men and children, portraying individuals in ways that highlights vulnerability in a tangible and relatable manner. Concurrently, and perhaps as a result of the dissemination of such photographs, government responses (including Australia’s) have been shaped more often by humanitarian concerns as opposed to what Martin (2015) describes as moral panic.

Importantly, asylum seekers are photographed in settings that are more universally recognisable (such as wearing western-style clothing and using items like mobile phones) and that Australians can relate to, reducing the possibility to imagine refugees as distant, primitive or uneducated. No longer are we able to distance ourselves from asylum seekers with ideas of foreign cultures far removed from our own reality. Nevertheless, given the circumstances being photographed, the images examined inevitably shared some of the photographic characteristics used historically to perpetuate the dehumanisation of asylum seekers and refugees featured, particularly the “use” of children to elicit compassionate responses from viewers. Clearly, avoiding the depiction of such perpetuated themes is potentially quite difficult considering the contexts of the photographs, in addition to the fact that these approaches remain effective at some level.
While the photographs were considered as stand-alone depictions of the refugee crisis, the contextual information in the articles was also important in two significant ways. First, the small act of identifying the person at the centre of a photograph by their names (Figures 1 and 2) counters the reductionist approach of using terms like “boat people” or referring to asylum seekers by numbers. Second, follow up reports in the media on the outcomes of the individuals’ respective journeys, as in the cases of Laith Majid and his family as well as Aylan Kurdi’s father, had the remarkable effect of focussing on the humanity of asylum seekers in public discourse as a strong counter-narrative. It appears that the public mood shifted rapidly and in a significant way in late 2015 following the dissemination of such photographs; Syrian asylum seekers were no longer seen as “needing saving” in a tokenistic way. Instead, there was recognition that all Syrian refugees were asking for was safe passage and compassion once they arrived in a country of asylum, and that there was a worldwide responsibility to protect people and act urgently.

What became clear from the comparison between the themes in dominant visual representations of asylum seekers and refugees and those that have emerged in recent times is that there has been a clear *shift* in the messages conveyed in the international as well as the Australian mainstream media. The change from the enduring, dehumanising moral panic linked to portraying refugees as woeful “poverty porn” or a security threat to Australian society shows a shift in *intent* towards re-humanising efforts, depicting women, men, and children as relatable in situations that are no longer quite as alien, to elicit viewers’ sense of connection, concern, and empathy. This was achieved in a meaningful way through the *visual* nature of the depictions.

The photographs that received intense media attention in 2015 have been ground breaking in many ways, given their influence on the tone of public discourse about asylum seekers and on policy changes on the international scene, but also in Australia. In September 2015, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott that 12,000 Syrian asylum seekers would be resettled to Australia as a response to the public outcry just a matter of days following the publication of photographs of Aylan Kurdi, signified the potential of such visual representations on public opinion and policy direction. While these efforts were slowed down to ensure security concerns are addressed appropriately, these measures remain symbolic of the potential for visual depictions to influence policy in one of the most difficult contexts.

**Conclusion**

While some progress in public discourse surrounding asylum seekers and refugees has occurred in 2015, unfortunately this does not mean that the effects of damaging representations have been eradicated (see Pederson & Hartley, 2015).
This shift in visual representations and resulting community support needs to be maintained if we are to expect any tangible policy reforms with regards to asylum seekers in Australia. Indeed, the issue of onshore and offshore mandatory detention of asylum seekers in the domestic sphere is still a key debate that has not changed much as a result of the emergence of these images on the international scene. As a result of the *Australian Border Force* era (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2016), the legislative barriers to journalists, activists, and public access and communication with those being held in detention are cause for concern. The media as well as the Australian public share a responsibility to continue to argue for transparency and compassion, and a concurrent proliferation of emotionally moving and poignant images in mainstream media as well as social media can contribute towards this change.

In the meantime, there is a clear discrepancy between the dominant constructions of asylum seekers in the Australian consciousness and the sense of urgency to assist Syrian refugees in times of crisis. It could be said that the shift in public perception following the death of Aylan Kurdi was rather short-lived, with security concerns gaining the upper hand; the terrorist attacks in France in November 2015 have added to suspicions and distrust of Syrian refugees currently seeking asylum. The issue of asylum seeking remains complex and there are no quick-fix solutions; however, the importance of visual representations should not be underestimated in significant efforts to shift public opinions and policy decisions. More in-depth and longitudinal research using mixed methods to establish the extent of the influence of visual representations of refugees on public consciousness and policy directions is certainly warranted.

**References**


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