

## The Production of Space of Refugees' Identity: Visual Analysis of BBC Indonesia's Rohingya Representation

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### ABSTRACT

This study conducts a thorough analysis of how BBC Indonesia visually portrays Rohingya refugees between 2020 and 2023. It emphasizes the complex influence of the media in affecting public opinions amid a humanitarian crisis. Although media coverage of refugees in Indonesia is not as extensive as in Europe, it remains significant due to the persistent crises impacting the Rohingya people. This investigation examines whether Indonesian media, similar to European media, perpetuates stereotypes that could impact societal views towards refugees. This study examines the impact of visual media, namely the images used by BBC Indonesia, on the formation and comprehension of Rohingya identities. The result reveals contradictions in the visual narratives of this major news platform, which are designed to promote unity and shed light on the challenges experienced by refugees. However, it also examines the potential for these portrayals to unintentionally strengthen exclusionary political beliefs. The findings suggest that although the purpose of the representation is to evoke empathy and garner support for the Rohingya, certain depictions may inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes and promote isolation. This study also highlights the crucial importance for media organizations to be aware of the influence their depictions might have on public perception and government decisions regarding refugees. It proposes adopting a more cautious approach when visually documenting such delicate topics.

**Keywords:** *Media representations, space of identity, refugee, visual image, Indonesia.*

### INTRODUCTION

In his influential work, "Racism and Press", Van Dijk (1991) posited that the press not only establishes the topics under consideration in public discourse but, of greater significance, it exerts substantial influence in shaping the manner in which readers formulate thoughts and engage in discussions pertaining to particular subjects. Furthermore, Van Dijk underscored the media's capacity to either foster empathy or exacerbate divisions in the portrayal of societal groups. This argument finds pertinence in the context of the media's depiction of refugees. The nexus between the media and refugees is a profound and highly impactful one, with the media assuming a pivotal role in moulding public perceptions and attitudes towards those who have been forcibly displaced (Jelínková, 2019; Smets, 2018). Media platforms also serve as indispensable conduits for disseminating information, affording the public an opportunity to gain insights into the underlying factors precipitating the status of individuals and communities as refugees. Through diverse media forms such as news reporting, documentaries, and artistic renderings, narratives concerning refugees are thrust to the

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forefront, thereby shedding light on the intricate and often emotionally distressing circumstances compelling individuals to abandon their homelands (Moura, 2023).

The media assumes a significant role in aiding refugees by virtue of its capacity to raise awareness and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of displacement. Through its coverage of armed conflicts, political oppression, persecution, environmental disasters, and other triggers of displacement, the media serves to humanize the refugee experience. In so doing, it furnishes the audience with a well-informed perspective on the challenges and hardships faced by refugees, thereby nurturing empathy and fostering comprehension (d'Haenens et al., 2019).

The exposure of individuals to compelling narratives and evocative imagery depicting the struggles and resilience of refugees often elicits sympathy and compassion for those who have been compelled to abandon their homes. The media's profound capacity to evoke emotions and engender a sense of connectedness to the plight of refugees can lead to increased public support and a heightened willingness to extend assistance (Almenara-Niebla, 2020). Those who are deeply moved by the stories of refugees may, in turn, be inclined to take action, whether it be through charitable contributions, volunteerism, or advocacy for policy reform (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020). In this manner, the media functions as an instrument for mobilizing humanitarian responses and fostering a global community committed to the welfare of refugees.

While the media unquestionably serves as a force for promoting public solidarity, it simultaneously operates as a powerful tool for raising awareness, nurturing empathy, and championing the rights and needs of refugees (Esses et al., 2013; Zetter, 1991). National and even global media events, often conducted in a ceremonial and ritualistic manner, possess the capacity to foster a sense of collective identity (Couldry, 2012). When individuals engage with news stories about refugees, they are prompted to empathize with the challenges faced by these displaced individuals. However, Nikunen (2019) raises a critical question in response to this phenomenon: Whose imaginations are we discussing? These rituals are not inherently inclusive and can potentially serve to exclude, polarize, and provoke friction. Media outlets carefully select specific stories, angles, and images for presentation to their audiences, thereby influencing how refugees are perceived. While responsible journalism has the potential to yield accurate and equitable portrayals, there is however an inherent risk of oversimplification, sensationalism, or the perpetuation of stereotypes about refugees.

Within the Indonesian context, the depiction of refugees through media imagery and artistic renderings has garnered attention and elicited concern (Bal, 2022; Bleiker et al., 2021). This article thus attempts to explore the historical and contemporary aspects of how refugees are represented within the Indonesian media, with a particular emphasis on the coverage provided by BBC Indonesia. Through an examination of the construction and perpetuation of refugees' identities within media spaces, this study aims to elucidate the repercussions and potential consequences associated with such portrayals.

Indonesia has historically played a role as both a transit and host country for refugees in the Southeast Asian region. Throughout its history, Indonesia has received waves of refugees fleeing from neighbouring countries due to political conflicts, persecution, and natural disasters (Hoffstaedter & Missbach, 2022). The influx of refugees into Indonesia finds its roots in pivotal events such as the Indochina refugee crisis of the 1970s, during which a considerable number sought sanctuary from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. It is noteworthy that Indonesia has not acceded to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, thereby lacking a comprehensive legal framework for the safeguarding of refugees and asylum-seekers

(Gunawan et al., 2024). Instead, the Indonesian government has chiefly managed refugee-related matters through ad hoc responses and in collaboration with international entities, most notably the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Over the course of time, Indonesia has provided refuge to diverse refugee communities, including Rohingyas, Afghan refugees, Somali asylum-seekers, and asylum-seekers hailing from nations in the Middle East and Africa.

Despite its commendable humanitarian efforts, Indonesia has refrained from ratifying the 1951 Geneva Convention along with its 1967 Protocol, which constitute global accords specifying the rights of refugees and the responsibilities of states in ensuring their protection. This situation presents a multifaceted conundrum: notwithstanding Indonesia's provision of immediate humanitarian aid, it has abstained from endorsing any legally binding framework that assures the enduring safeguarding and well-being of Rohingya refugees. Consequently, a significant number of Rohingya individuals residing in Indonesia confront an uncertain and precarious future, frequently residing in encampments or community shelters with restricted access to educational opportunities, healthcare services, and formal employment opportunities (Missbach & Stange, 2021). These limitations underscore the provisional and vulnerable character of Indonesia's approach, thereby underscoring the necessity for a more enduring and legally established resolution.

The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority, have their origins primarily in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Despite their historical presence in the region, they have been subjected to a systematic campaign of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and violence, much of which has received official sanction or been perpetrated by the Myanmar state and military (Lindsay, 2022). Media representations play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of humanitarian crises; however, they often frame minority groups like the Rohingya through reductive and disempowering narratives. As Kanaker, Abughazlih, and Kasmani (2020) observe, outlets such as the BBC and Aljazeera frequently emphasize security and military frames, reinforcing the image of the Rohingya as powerless victims while neglecting the broader historical and political context of their plight. This tendency risks marginalizing their identity and agency. Building on this critique, the present study investigates how BBC Indonesia visually represents the Rohingya between 2020 and 2023, aiming to uncover whether similar framing patterns persist and how they may influence public perception and discourse in the Indonesian context.

Given Indonesia's position as the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, the Rohingya crisis garners substantial attention within the Indonesian media (Missbach & Stange, 2021). The Indonesian media frequently employ a narrative centred on "Muslim solidarity" when addressing this issue, capitalising on the shared religious identity to intensify the emotional impact of their reporting. This strategic framing serves several objectives (Darnela, 2021). Firstly, it captures the public's attention in a media landscape inundated with news and updates. A story framed around religious kinship compels the audience to pause and delve into the intricacies, leading to increased engagement levels, including greater click-through rates, sharing, and comments, thereby expanding the story's outreach.

This narrative style aims not only to raise awareness but also harbours the pragmatic intention of mobilizing action, at both governmental and individual levels. When the plight of the Rohingya is depicted as a transgression against a community sharing a religious affiliation with many Indonesians, it elicits an empathetic response and a sense of duty to provide assistance. This heightened emotional engagement may translate into concrete actions,

ranging from charitable donations to grassroots initiatives aimed at delivering humanitarian aid (Darnela, 2021). In essence, clicking on a news article to learn about the Rohingya becomes an act of solidarity in itself, reinforcing the reader's commitment to the cause.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Numerous studies have investigated the representations of refugees and immigrants in media imagery, with a particular focus on the European context. These studies generally converge on a shared conclusion: media depictions of refugees and immigrants are often deemed biased. For instance, Martikainen and Sakki (2021), in their examination of mainstream Finnish national newspapers, assert that media employs visual representations, particularly photographs, to implement strategies of (de)humanization in constructing intergroup relations within the context of refugees. These depictions often serve to perpetuate the division between the ingroup, representing "us" (European people/Finnish), and the outgroup, signifying "them" (refugees).

Drüeke et al. (2021) similarly arrive at this conclusion in their research, which centres on Austrian press photographs accompanying reports on flight and refugees in 2015, particularly within the geopolitical sphere. They note that press photographs frequently establish distinct boundaries between the "we" (European people) and the "others" (refugees). Additionally, Hvalkof's study (2016) delves into the representation of refugees and migrants in Danish newspapers. Her research reveals a prevailing visual pattern wherein refugees and migrants are portrayed as the racialized "Other." These depictions construct refugees and migrants as distinct from the European population, particularly the Danish, through categories that include "passive," "non-white," and "mass."

Several recent studies have explored the topic of refugees in Indonesia, although such investigations remain relatively scarce. The existing body of research primarily concentrates on the analysis of news narratives. Notably, the findings from these studies indicate a discernible similarity between the depiction of refugees in Indonesian media and that in European media. For instance, the research by Wicaksono (2019) examined 36 reports related to refugees across 17 Indonesian online news platforms, revealing the recurrent portrayal of refugees through specific stereotypes. Additionally, mainstream media outlets have affixed particular labels to refugees. Notably, Kompas Newspaper published an article titled "*Keprihatinan atas Imigran Gelap*" (Concerns for Illegal Immigrants). The application of the term "*Imigran Gelap*" (illegal immigrants) in reference to refugees carries a stigmatizing connotation. This label casts refugees as individuals who have violated immigration regulations, consequently framing them as a potential burden and a source of social vulnerability. Furthermore, this terminology tends to distance the public from recognizing refugees as victims of persecution who are in need of humanitarian assistance from the state.

Media reports concerning refugees establishing unauthorized settlements exemplify a manifestation of this stereotyping. As an illustration, CNN Indonesia featured an image on its news portal depicting the living conditions of refugees residing on the sidewalks along Jalan Kalideres, Jakarta. Additionally, Media Indonesia covered the circumstances of refugees from Afghanistan and Somalia who have set up illegal encampments on Jalan Kebon Sirih, Jakarta. Even Kompas, another prominent media outlet, has visually portrayed refugees inhabiting the sidewalks of Jalan Kalideres. In these visual representations, refugees are consistently portrayed in conditions of poverty, as observed in Wicaksono's study in 2019.

Nadira (2018) conducted a study focused on the reporting of Rohingya refugees on *Tribunnews.com*. Among the 36 news stories subjected to analysis, Rohingya refugees were notably marginalized within the primary narrative of the news articles. The reports predominantly cast the Indonesian government as the central actor in the news coverage. Consequently, this results in an imbalanced portrayal of Rohingya refugees in the news. The editorial strategy of *Tribunnews* prioritizes economic considerations when reporting on events. Consequently, the news articles position Rohingya refugees as objects and commodities. This high level of interest is indicative of the significant demand within Indonesia for information concerning the Rohingya. Moreover, this elevated demand is closely linked to acts of solidarity and fundraising initiatives aimed at supporting Rohingya refugees.

In a related study, Andalas (2019) examined how reports on Rohingya refugees contribute to the formation of a discourse surrounding the idea of Indonesian Muslim solidarity. This analysis involved an evaluation of how Rohingya refugees were portrayed in seven news articles on *Viva.co.id*. The findings illustrate that the discourse tends to portray Indonesia, as the nation with the world's largest Muslim population, as a hero of humanity. In doing so, this discourse marginalises other groups. Myanmar's government is consistently depicted in a negative light, while the Rohingya refugees are portrayed as a group in a state of suffering and in need of assistance. Once more, this positioning reduces Rohingya refugees to the status of mere objects that affirms the status of the Indonesian state as the saviour of humanity.

It is readily apparent that previous research pertaining to the portrayal of refugees in the Indonesian media landscape is conspicuously limited. This existing void in the body of knowledge presents us with a unique opportunity to augment the existing literature concerning immigrants and refugees within the Indonesian context. Notably, the analysis of visual representations within BBC Indonesia's coverage of refugee matters remains an uncharted territory, thus rendering this research initiative an imperative endeavour to rectify this gap.

In practice, journalists, including photographers, serve not only as mere conveyors of information but also actively participate in shaping the events they depict. Drücke et al. (2021) assert that this involvement results in the emergence of virtual, symbolic, and imaginative spaces through the strategic placement of individuals and the dynamic negotiation and construction of identity, choices, and narratives. The portrayal of Rohingya refugees in the photographs featured by BBC Indonesia becomes evident that they are situated within specific geographic locations. These images extend beyond mere documentation of factual occurrences. Furthermore, the perspective chosen by the photographers and the focal points they emphasize serve to elucidate the identities of the Rohingya refugees. In effect, these photographs provide valuable insights into the Rohingya refugees—shedding light on their individual identities, self-perceptions, and their relationships with the local populace.

#### METHODOLOGY

The principal aim of this research is to scrutinize the manner in which BBC Indonesia represents refugees via media imagery and artistic portrayals. Through a comprehensive analysis of media reporting and the visual depiction of refugees, this study seeks to elucidate the processes involved in the construction and perpetuation of refugee identities and the way in which the media shapes them as 'the other.' In essence, this investigation endeavours to

reveal discernible patterns and prevailing tendencies in the process of construction and production of media images that shape and enhance refugee identities.

BBC News Indonesia is a constituent of the expansive 42-language BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) World Service, with its headquarters situated in London and international offices, including one in Jakarta. The BBC holds a well-established reputation as a highly regarded and trustworthy news organization (Horowitz et al., 2022). It becomes the compelling reasons that underscore the selection of BBC Indonesia as a media source for the analysis of refugees. BBC boasts a longstanding history of furnishing dependable and impartial reporting on diverse global issues, encompassing crises involving refugees and migrants. The BBC adheres rigorously to stringent editorial guidelines and is committed to delivering precise and reliable information to its audience.

BBC also places a paramount emphasis on presenting a spectrum of perspectives and voices within its reporting (Berry, 2020). The BBC's unwavering dedication to impartiality signifies its commitment to representing these varied perspectives, thereby contributing to a more holistic comprehension of the intricate challenges that envelop refugees and migrants (Burns, 2022). Founded upon this eminent reputation, this study will meticulously scrutinize the manner in which BBC Indonesia portrays refugee identities through its coverage, particularly within the visual domain.

Our research encompassed three distinct phases aimed at conducting a comprehensive analysis of the images utilized in media representations of refugees. In the initial stage, we employed content analysis to discern prevalent patterns and structures inherent in these images. The codebook devised for this analysis included various categories, such as image type, portrayal type, image composition (inclusive of camera perspective), the presence of other individuals in addition to refugees, and estimations concerning the age and gender of the depicted subjects. We identified a total of 42 news articles related to refugees within the archives of BBC Indonesia from January 2020 to July 2023. This number, although relatively small, is reflective of the relatively limited prominence of refugee-related issues in the Indonesian media, in contrast to the more comprehensive coverage afforded by European media. Given our specific focus on Rohingya refugees, we refined our selection to isolate only the articles that explicitly addressed the Rohingya issue, resulting in a total of 27 articles. The remaining articles in the broader dataset pertained to refugees and migrants from other national backgrounds.

With a specific emphasis on visual representations, the research team undertook a systematic classification process to identify and analyse images contained within the 27 articles that had been previously selected for their direct relevance to the Rohingya refugee issue. This classification yielded a total of 178 visual items, consisting of 173 photographs and 5 drawings. Through a rigorous analytical framework, the research team further refined this dataset by selecting 18 photographs that were deemed to meaningfully represent the conceptual dimensions of "space" as theorized and adapted from the works of Drücke, Chouliaraki, and Stolic. Drawing upon these foundational studies, the authors elaborated three distinct spatial categories that encapsulate the narrative and symbolic dimensions found within the visual data: *A Space for Imagination: Visualizing Suffer*, *A Space of Geopolitics: Creating Border*, and *A Space for Identification: Rohingya Refugees as Threatening Mass*. These categories served as interpretive lenses through which the selected images were examined to reveal the underlying structures of meaning conveyed by the visual portrayals. The final selection of 18 photographs corresponded to these three spatial themes and was distinguished by its representative power, while the remaining images, although numerous,

were found to be either redundant in meaning or repetitive in thematic expression and thus were excluded from further in-depth analysis. This methodological refinement underscores the intention to focus not merely on frequency but on the symbolic weight and discursive value of imagery in shaping public perceptions of the Rohingya through visual media.

In the second phase, we embarked on a qualitative visual analysis with the objective of identifying and elucidating the dominant motifs within the images thereby illuminating the implicit themes and narratives conveyed through visual depictions of refugees. Recognizing the profound significance of visual imagery in the process of meaning construction, our analytical approach attempts to conceptualize meaning as a representational system, which delves into the ways repetitive or analogous images within the media frame specific issues. The third phase entailed a visual context analysis, designed to unearth the intricate interplay between the images and the underlying conceptual frameworks, or figures of thought. Using Müller's framework of visual context analysis (2007, 2011), we interpreted the image motifs within the wider context of socio-political dynamics and the cultural patterns of reproduction. Through this contextualization of the images, we garnered insights into their alignment with or challenge to prevailing norms and beliefs, thereby furnishing a deeper comprehension of the broader socio-political ramifications inherent in media portrayals.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. *A Space for Imagination: Visualizing Suffer*

Nikunen (2019) posited that the media plays a crucial role in fostering solidarity by providing a platform for the imagination. The media can facilitate audiences in perceiving strangers as fellow individuals who are also enduring hardships. Notably, there exist disparities between the audience and refugees, who are often viewed as unfamiliar entities arriving from distant lands overseas. These perceived differences tend to provoke a distinction between "us" and "them." The media faces a challenging task when it aims to uphold common identities while simultaneously acknowledging these differences. Wlode characterizes this situation as the paradox of solidarity: *on the one hand it has connotations of unity and universality, emphasizing responsibility for others and the feeling of togetherness; while on the other hand it exhibits itself most forcefully in antagonism to other groups* (in Nikunen, 2019). In our analysis of the press photographs depicting refugees, it is discernible that BBC Indonesia also aligns with the principles proposed by Wlode, as they navigate this paradox of solidarity.

#### a) *The Representations of Distant Suffering*

BBC Indonesia's reporting on events concerning refugees primarily emphasizes feelings of sadness and compassion. This is achieved through the portrayal of the tumultuous conditions within the camps and the suffering experienced by the individuals. Figures 1 to 4 illustrate the makeshift camps housing displaced refugees, highlighting their dire circumstances.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Source: Images from book written by d'Haenens et al. (2019)

Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) note that refugees are predominantly portrayed as vulnerable victims. The visual content predominantly features women and children within the encampment areas, with comparatively fewer depictions of men. The camera angles employed effectively capture the distress experienced by women and children. For instance, Figure 1 illustrates a young boy amidst a squalid and dishevelled shelter environment. The photograph employs the eye-level angle technique, positioning the camera parallel to the subject, thereby presenting the scene in a natural and relatable manner. This technique is employed to authentically convey the grim conditions within the refugee camp, with the young boy symbolizing the suffering endured by the refugees. A similar approach is adopted in Figure 2. Utilizing the eye-level technique, this image showcases a crowd of individuals, primarily women, seated within a large and disorderly tent. The image effectively communicates that the large tent is not a suitable place for habitation. Both images elicit empathy from the viewers by vividly portraying the challenging circumstances faced by the refugees.

According to Chouliaraki and Stolic, the deliberate portrayal of innocent and vulnerable children serves as a means of evoking sentiments of compassion and parental care. The inclusion of powerless children within these images bears resemblance to the paternalistic tendencies observed during the colonial era, wherein adult colonisers perceived the colonized as individuals in need of assistance. The strategic utilisation of children to elicit empathy symbolises the depiction of refugees as dependent, effectively silencing their own voices and agency in the narrative. This unfavourable position is also discernible in depictions of women within a congested tent (Figure 2) and a group of children (Figure 4), who are portrayed as faceless figures gazing vacantly into space, devoid of eye contact. Such portrayals reinforce the dichotomy between "us" and "the others," as delineated by Wilmot (in Drücke et al., 2021).



In summary, the images of refugees in BBC Indonesia's news coverage are marked by inherent ambiguities. While they afford the audience an opportunity to construct their subjectivity as spectators, cultivate empathy for a distant suffering, and awaken moral responsibility, these images concurrently dehumanize the refugees by infantilizing them and reducing them to pitiful objects (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021).

*b) The Politics of Pity*

Drawing from Chouliaraki's work in 2004, the politics of pity seeks to bridge the geographical and temporal divides that separate observers from those who are suffering. Its purpose is to foster a sense of closeness that can effectively engage the observers, or spectators. The politics of pity creates a spectacle of suffering, wherein individuals in distress are observed by those who may never directly experience the same suffering.

BBC Indonesia serves as an intermediary that bridges not only the geographical but also the emotional gaps between the audience and the refugees. It opts to prioritize the visibility of the most visually striking events in order to capture the audience's attention. These elements are discernible in the visual images:



Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Source: Images from book written by d'Haenens et al. (2019)

All images utilize close-up shots, concentrating on the subjects from shoulder level up to their heads, with the intent to unveil their expressions and emotions. Close-up shots serve to diminish the social distance and bring the observers closer to the subjects. The images capture intimate moments between individuals: a mother with her son (Figure 5), a mother with her daughter or, perhaps, a friend (Figure 6), and a girl with her friend (Figure 7). In each of these images, the profound sadness and distress etched on their faces are unmistakable. The consistent preference of BBC Indonesia for featuring sorrow and unfortunate circumstances as the focal point in their press photographs of refugees through the use of close-up shots raises a pertinent question: is this approach aimed at evoking compassion, or does it border on voyeuristic consumption?

As a renowned media outlet, BBC Indonesia faces formidable competition in capturing people's attention, thereby fostering a proclivity to appeal to their emotions. Consequently, in depicting the adversity experienced by these women, photographers choose to infuse an artistic element, using the visual representation of victims as a means to enhance engagement. However, while the presentation of people's suffering is accentuated, BBC Indonesia falls short in guiding the spectators towards an understanding of how to ameliorate the dire circumstances. In this context, the spectators essentially become voyeurs, as delineated by Sontag (2004). As Chouliaraki (2006) has emphasized, the act of observing the spectacle of another's misfortune creates an ethical dilemma since the spectators often find

themselves constrained in terms of meaningful action. Consequently, these spectators transition into the role of voyeurs.

## *2. A Space of Geopolitics: Creating Border*

In accordance with Hipfl (cited in Drüeke et al., 2021), the media plays a significant role in shaping geopolitical spaces. Through visual images, the media defines boundaries, assigns locations to nations, and designates landscapes in which distinct identities find their positioning. Building upon this, Drüeke et al. (2021: 168) further elaborate that when reporting events concerning refugees and immigrants, media constructs geopolitical spaces that encompass political-geographic contexts. These contexts connect individuals with cultural practices and establish them within the framework of other territories, locales, or spaces. This intricate process engenders an imaginative geography, complete with depictions of landscapes and their inhabitants. Consequently, specific groups of people become situated within particular locations and regions, which, in turn, facilitates the examination of one's socio-cultural identity and reinforces the construction of national identities.

The media's representation of global events significantly contributes to the shaping of political-geographic or geopolitical spaces. Through this portrayal, individuals are positioned in relation to their cultural practices and contrasted with other geographical regions, thus giving rise to a virtual geography. This constructed imagery includes depictions of landscapes and the individuals who inhabit them. Consequently, specific groups of people are effectively located within particular places and regions, facilitating an exploration of their socio-cultural identity and reinforcing the construction of national identity.

In our analysis, BBC Indonesia framed Rohingya refugees within specific settings. The most prevalent themes found within their visual representation include the journey, often depicting the conditions on overcrowded boats, the open sea, or their arrival via boats with the sea as a backdrop. Additionally, there is a recurring theme related to the locations of shelters or camps where the refugees are settled.

### *a) Land of Promise*

Indonesia's relative geographical accessibility, regional stability, and its status as a country of transit for refugees seeking resettlement in other nations contribute to its attractiveness (Tan, 2016) as a destination for refugees. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognise that Indonesia, like many other countries, faces its own challenges in managing and supporting refugee populations, given the absence of a comprehensive legal framework for refugee protection and the need for international cooperation in addressing the global refugee crisis.

In light of these considerations, BBC Indonesia, along with other international media, highlights the vital role of boats and life vests for refugees. These elements are instrumental in facilitating their journeys to safety and better prospects, especially for those fleeing conflicts, persecution, or natural disasters, where crossing bodies of water is often their sole means of escape (Damousi et al., 2022). Boats serve as indispensable transport vessels, allowing refugees to traverse seas or rivers and reach more secure destinations, including neighbouring countries or regions characterized by greater stability and safety. Moreover, life vests play a crucial role in ensuring the safety of refugees during perilous and unpredictable sea voyages. This underlines the significance of these items in the context of the challenges faced by both refugees and the countries that host them.

As illustrated in Figure 8, the captured imagery portrays a scene of profound significance, featuring two adult men and a woman navigating a densely packed ship while cradling their children. This scene serves as a symbolic representation of their pursuit of refuge and optimism as they venture into uncharted territories. The visual narrative encapsulates the essence of displacement, embodying the collective aspirations of individuals yearning for a better life beyond the confines of their past. As the subjects move with a determined poise, the surrounding crowd exudes an air of impatience, reflecting their shared eagerness to disembark and embrace new horizons brimming with hope. Within this evocative tableau, the expressions and body language of the subjects convey a palpable sense of resilience and responsibility, emblematic of caregivers striving to secure a brighter future for their progeny. The densely occupied ship serves as a poignant symbol of transition, representing both the physical journey and the metaphorical crossing into unfamiliar territories that offer opportunities for renewal and personal growth. The composition invokes a powerful visual representation of the universal human desire for sanctuary and the collective quest for emancipation from adverse circumstances. It encourages contemplation on the intricate dimensions of the human experience as individuals pursue new lands and new hopes, ultimately highlighting the complexities of their journey towards a brighter future.



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Source: Images from book written by d'Haenens et al. (2019)

Likewise, in Figure 9, the visually striking image encapsulates a poignant moment in which a man carries a woman wearing a headscarf on a beach. Concurrently, two other men dutifully transport belongings traditionally associated with women. This collective effort of these individuals signifies a steadfast commitment to the immediate rescue and support of the female refugee, symbolizing the profound empathy and solidarity that underscore such transformative journeys towards a new land, where hope for a better life prevails. The scene conveys an air of urgency and determination, underscoring the shared aspiration to provide sanctuary and opportunities for a brighter future to those who have been displaced from their past. It serves as a compelling visual testament to the compassion and cooperation that emerge during moments of crisis and transition, highlighting the resilience and unity that fuel the pursuit of a more promising life in new and unfamiliar surroundings.

The image of the land of hope is also vividly portrayed in Figure 10. This image captures a boat in close proximity to the new land, with a man carrying a young boy, symbolising the immediate rescue of refugees as they arrive on the new and safer territory. Set against the backdrop of the beach and the land, this image conveys a symbolic narrative of the transition from adversity to the promise of a brighter tomorrow (Drücke et al., 2021). The beach serves as a liminal space, a threshold between the familiar and the unknown, symbolising the departure from a troubled past and the hopeful anticipation of a more optimistic future. The

act of rescuing the woman and the presence of belongings in the image collectively represent a shared commitment to nurturing and safeguarding vulnerable individuals throughout their journey. Gender roles are notably emphasised within this visual representation, underscoring the pivotal role of compassion and collective responsibility in providing support and empowerment to those who seek solace and renewal on the shores of new opportunities.

Media outlets, including BBC Indonesia, frequently opt to capture photographs of refugees on seashores during their arrival from the ship to the land for several compelling reasons. Firstly, it is done to create a strong emotional impact, as the image of refugees disembarking from crowded ships onto foreign shores has the capacity to evoke profound emotions in the audience. This imagery can effectively convey the urgency and intensity of the refugee experience. Additionally, the choice of seashores as a setting symbolizes the notion of transition. Seashores are often considered liminal spaces (Preston-Whyte, 2004), signifying a boundary between the known and the unknown, as well as the past and the future. Capturing refugees at this critical juncture underscores their journey from a place of crisis and displacement to a new destination, where hope for a better life resides. The shoreline, in this context, serves as a potent metaphor for new beginnings and fresh opportunities, resonating with both the refugees themselves and the viewers, who are drawn into the narrative of transformation and renewal.

*b) Drawing the virtual boundaries*

In the images where Rohingya refugees are shown in BBC Indonesia, there are virtual demarcation lines constructed by physical spaces which are delineated from other places where the natives or the spectators/observers reside.



Figure 11



Figure 12

Source: Images from book written by d'Haenens et al. (2019)

In Figure 11, a poignant scene unfolds as three young boys are captured in the act of prayer behind a forbidding barbed wire fence. In the background, a cluster of makeshift houses stands as shelters for Rohingya refugees. The observers are positioned on the opposing side of the fence, beholding the boys and the dwellings that are distinctly separated from their vantage point. The presence of the barbed wire fence conjures associations with confinement, resembling the features of a prison or even a concentration camp. The caption accompanying the image further explicates that the barbed wire fence was erected to safeguard the Rohingya people from engaging in criminal activities. This image effectively positions the Rohingya people as "the other," accentuating the stark division between "us" (the observers) and "them" (the Rohingya people). Furthermore, it symbolises the imperative of safeguarding against outsiders, reinforcing the notion of protection from the Rohingya people as perceived outsiders.

Figure 12 presents a segment of the shelter erected for the Rohingya population, enclosed by elevated terrain. These highlands assume the role of a symbolic divider between the refugees and the surrounding population. In both these images, two distinct territories are unmistakably demarcated: the territory of the refugees on one side and the unseen “we” or the resident population on the other side. Once more, this serves as a clear illustration of how the visual representation of refugees underscores the practice of exclusion, emphasizing the divisions between these two groups.

### *3. A Space for Identification: Rohingya Refugees as Threatening Mass*

The media plays an important role in shaping identity spaces, contributing significantly to the formulation and delineation of arenas for self-identification. These spaces, typically shaped by media narratives and representations, serve as platforms through which individuals establish and negotiate their identities, fostering connections with specific social groups or communities. By presenting a range of identities, beliefs, and lifestyles, media content offers audiences the opportunity to resonate with characters or themes that align with their own experiences and aspirations. Through this process of identification, individuals cultivate a sense of belonging and affiliation, thereby reinforcing their self-concept and social bonds. The concept of media-constructed identity spaces directs our attention to the dynamic interplay between media portrayals and the cultivation of social identities. The media not only mirrors existing social identities but actively influences how identities are both perceived and constructed (Edgerly et al., 2020). This influence can yield both empowering and constraining effects, as media representations can either perpetuate or challenge stereotypes, thereby contributing to the ongoing negotiation of identity within society. By scrutinizing these media-constructed spaces, researchers gain valuable insights into the intricate relationship between media content, personal identification, and societal norms, thereby illuminating the broader cultural landscape.

Within these constructed spaces of identity, the concept investigates inquiries into the mechanisms through which membership within imagined communities is solidified. Media content assumes a significant role in delineating the criteria for both inclusion and exclusion, effectively defining the boundaries that separate distinct social groups. This process often involves the portrayal of shared values, cultural symbols, and norms, all of which significantly impact how individuals perceive themselves and their relationship with others within these imagined communities. Furthermore, the media's role in accentuating differentiation and exclusion beckons a critical examination of how specific identities or groups may be marginalized, underscoring the imperative of media literacy and the responsible creation of content to foster more inclusive societies. Essentially, the concept of media-constructed spaces of identity underscores the intricate interplay between media content and the establishment of social identities. Through the analysis of how media narratives contribute to the negotiation and formation of identities, we gain valuable insights into the power dynamics, representation, and inclusivity within societies. In light of this, we turn our attention to the identity that BBC Indonesia attempts to associate with Rohingya Refugees, as we analyse the content presented in these images.





Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

Source: Images from book written by d'Haenens et al. (2019)

The four pictures exhibit notable similarities: they feature a gathering of Rohingya refugees - depicted as a faceless, eye-contact-lacking mass-captured in wide-angle, long shots. The predominant theme in the images we encountered on BBC Indonesia is the depiction of a collective group of refugees. The use of long shots serves to emphasize the scale and magnitude of this gathering (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), consequently leading observers to perceive this collective of Rohingya refugees as a formidable mass of people. According to Weber & Pickering (2012), the portrayal of such masses can have the effect of criminalisation. Several studies focusing on refugees in Europe have highlighted that the magnified impact of such imagery serves as a metaphor for a "flood," an advancing "current," or a colossal "wave" that appears to pose a threat of overwhelming "us" (Drüeke et al., 2021). It is evident that the four photographs are articulating a consistent discourse, one that underscores the representation of the refugees as an imposing group of masses.

In these images, the countenances of the Rohingya individuals are not distinctly visible. Some of them are portrayed with their backs turned to the observers, concealed behind masks, and notably avoid making eye contact. The deliberate depiction of these faceless and anonymous masses serves to position them as strangers (Banks, 2012) who maintain no direct connection with the observers (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). These visual representations purposefully establish a sense of detachment between the Rohingya people and the observers, perpetuating the distinctions that underline the divide between "us" and "them."

The construction of Rohingya refugees as a threat is further accentuated by the presence of police personnel, as depicted in Figure 13. As noted by Wilmott (2017), the interactions between refugees and military, police, and coastguard personnel have contributed to framing the refugees as criminals and potential sources of danger.

BBC Indonesia appears to categorize the Rohingya refugees as a threat, employing a strategy of exclusion and othering. This is achieved by depicting the Rohingya people as a massive group entering the borders, utilizing boats and the sea as symbolic elements, and

incorporating the presence of the police in these visuals. The portrayal of this threat is further amplified by the depiction of local people's anger and discomfort. This sentiment is notably illustrated in Figures 17 and 18, wherein a group of Acehnese individuals, who are the local residents of Aceh (a region located at the tip of Sumatra Island), are shown staging demonstrations with the intent of expelling the refugees. Their agitation stems from perceived improper behaviour by the Rohingya refugees, including incidents such as the alleged theft of coconuts from local people's yards and allegations of adulterous conduct.



Figure 17



Figure 18

Source: Images from book written by d'Haenens et al. (2019)

The portrayal of refugees as a threat has become an all-too-common media narrative when reporting on this vulnerable population. This recurring theme is highlighted by various academic studies conducted on refugees in Europe, including works by Banks (2012), Bleiker et al. (2013), Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017), Drüeke et al. (2021), Haslam (2006), Martikainen and Sakki (2021), and Šarić (2019). These studies collectively shed light on the persistent trend of portraying refugees in a negative light, often emphasising them as potential dangers rather than as individuals in need of assistance and understanding.

The depiction of refugees as threats by media outlets such as BBC Indonesia can be interpreted as a form of media ritual, a practice that constructs and perpetuates a specific social reality. This ritualistic portrayal is not merely an impartial journalistic activity; rather, it is a cultural practice deeply rooted in power dynamics and ideologies. Through the recurrent framing of refugees as "others" (individuals from outside who potentially pose risks), the media exerts significant influence in shaping societal attitudes and policy responses. This framing reinforces existing societal and cultural apprehensions, effectively transforming refugees into symbols that can be manipulated to evoke fear or suspicion. Consequently, this media ritual actively contributes to the divisions and prejudices within society.

Consistently depicting refugees as an impending threat rather than as intricate individuals with their own tales, requirements, and contributions, the media restricts the scope for compassionate engagement. This diminishes opportunities for the audience to relate to refugees as fellow human beings grappling with challenging circumstances. Instead, by characterising refugees as a 'challenge' or a 'concern,' the audience is guided towards contemplating solutions that often entail exclusion or suppression, as opposed to empathy or integration. The media's capacity to define the narrative plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and policy, particularly when it becomes a ritualised practice that reinforces the social classification of refugees as "outsiders" who ought to be feared rather than comprehended. This exemplifies the idea that media serves to disseminate ideologies that support prevailing power structures, frequently at the cost of marginalized groups such as refugees.

One notable limitation of this study lies in its exclusive focus on the visual content presented by the media, without examining how audiences interpret or respond to these images. While the analysis offers insights into the patterns, themes, and framing strategies employed in BBC Indonesia's visual portrayal of Rohingya refugees, it does not extend to understanding the cognitive or emotional impact such imagery may have on readers. As a result, the study does not capture how these visual representations shape public perception, reinforce or challenge stereotypes, or influence broader social and political attitudes toward refugees.

Future research may address this gap by incorporating audience reception studies to investigate how different segments of the public interpret and make meaning from refugee-related images in the media. Such research could employ qualitative methods such as interviews or focus group discussions, or quantitative approaches such as surveys, to assess viewers' reactions, emotional responses, and interpretive frameworks. This would provide a more holistic understanding of the relationship between media representations and audience perception, and could significantly enhance the scholarly discourse on media, migration, and visual communication.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude the discussion, this study sheds light on a significant ambiguity within modern journalism by examining the practices of BBC Indonesia, a subsidiary of the renowned British Broadcasting Corporation known for its commitment to balanced and comprehensive reporting. Despite its expansive global reach, which enables in-depth coverage of refugee and migrant issues, BBC Indonesia reflects broader patterns in European media by perpetuating visual narratives that are inherently problematic. Our research indicates that the portrayal of refugees tends to align with the prevalent trope of the "other."

These visual representations go beyond aesthetics, contributing to the politics of pity and exacerbating societal divisions. They implicitly establish an "us-versus-them" dichotomy, perpetuating stereotypes that further marginalize already vulnerable communities. This is especially disconcerting given the BBC's substantial influence, both in Indonesia and on the global stage. What is depicted and how it is presented can have far-reaching consequences for public opinion and policy, significantly shaping the contours of debates surrounding refugees and humanitarian issues.

Consequently, the results of this study underscore the need for critical examination and ethical contemplation within the journalism community. They emphasize the importance of news organizations, particularly those with the reach and reputation of the BBC, to rigorously assess and continuously re-evaluate their methods of representation, especially when dealing with complex and sensitive topics like migration and refugees. In an era where images wield considerable power for both information and influence, responsible media must ensure that these tools are used with care to enlighten rather than mislead.

### BIODATA

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