Media Representations of Refugees: The Interplay of Social Solidarity and the Politics of Othering

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Abstract

Media representations play a central role in shaping how societies understand refugees, influencing public emotions, political debates, and policy directions. In global contexts, the media draw upon two contrasting narratives: one emphasizing social solidarity and shared humanity, and the other reinforcing the politics of othering by framing refugees as culturally distinct, economically burdensome, or security threats. These dual portrayals have powerful effects on both public perception and the lived experiences of displaced communities. Despite Pakistan's long-standing role as a host country for Afghan refugees, limited research examines how refugees themselves interpret these representations and how such portrayals influence governmental approaches to refugee policy. This qualitative study was conducted in Balochistan, where Afghan refugees have resided for over four decades. In-depth interviews were conducted with twelve Afghan refugee community elders who have directly observed shifting media narratives over time. Thematic analysis revealed five interrelated themes: fluctuating portrayals of solidarity, the intensification of othering during political tension, the entrenchment of stereotypes, the emotional and identity impacts of media discourse, and the use of media narratives as policy justification by government officials. Findings highlight that media portrayals significantly influence not only public attitudes but also the daily sense of belonging and dignity experienced by refugees. Negative representations contribute to fear, exclusion, and uncertainty, whereas moments of solidarity provide temporary relief but rarely translate into long-term acceptance. The study calls for ethical journalism, balanced reporting, and inclusive policymaking to counter narratives of othering and strengthen social cohesion.

Keywords: Media Representations, Refugees, Social Solidarity, Politics of Othering.

1. Introduction

Global media discourses significantly shape public perceptions of refugees and influence social solidarity in host countries by framing narratives that can either foster empathy or exacerbate fear and division. Media coverage often oscillates between humanitarian narratives and securitization, impacting public attitudes and policy responses. For instance, the portrayal of refugees in European media during the 2015 crisis initially evoked solidarity, as seen in the widespread compassion following the image of Alan Kurdi, a drowned Syrian child, which mobilized global empathy and action (Mares & Allotey, 2003; Sajir & Aouragh,

2019). However, this initial wave of solidarity was later overshadowed by narratives of fear and securitization, as media began to emphasize the potential threats posed by refugees, leading to a shift in public sentiment and policy towards more restrictive measures (Fox-Hodess, 2023; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). In Lithuania, media and policy discourses have been shown to create both distances and opportunities for interaction between host societies and refugees, highlighting the role of normative assumptions in shaping integration policies (Blažytė et al., 2020). Similarly, in Lebanon, media campaigns have constructed Syrian refugees as threats to national stability, employing strategies of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, which further polarize public opinion and undermine solidarity (Ibrahim et al., 2025). The role of social media is also pivotal, as platforms like Twitter can amplify both solidarity and anti-solidarity sentiments, as evidenced by differing responses to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees (Grunow et al., 2023). In Italy, sensationalist media portrayals contribute to the perception of migrants as objects of fear, while also calling for innovative communication strategies to promote social coexistence (Musaro & Parmiggiani, 2017). Overall, media discourses play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and influencing the degree of social solidarity extended to refugees, with significant implications for policy and integration efforts in host countries (Cinalli et al., 2021).

Social solidarity movements in the Global South significantly influence the representation and integration of refugees in local communities by fostering inclusive environments and challenging traditional integration paradigms. In Jordan, the integration of Syrian refugees is facilitated by shared cultural and religious ties, which complicate but also enhance integration processes, as these similarities can both aid and hinder the integration depending on the context (Arar, 2023). In Bangladesh, the initial solidarity with Rohingya refugees was marked by widespread assistance, but over time, economic pressures and political uncertainties have shifted local sentiments towards resistance, highlighting the dynamic nature of solidarity in response to socio-economic challenges (Ansar & Khaled, 2021; Sajjad, 2022). In Brazil, mosques have played a crucial role in the integration of Syrian refugees, providing support where state mechanisms fall short and emphasizing the importance of religious and community networks in fostering integration (Baeza, 2018). Similarly, in Uganda, local integration is promoted through commerce and education, demonstrating how economic and social engagement can benefit both refugees and host communities (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004). The concept of urban sanctuary and solidarity, while often associated with the Global North, is also relevant in the Global South, where cities like those in Africa are exploring ways to resist repressive national policies and foster inclusive urban environments. Furthermore, cross-ethnic solidarity initiatives, such as those in Hong Kong, show how NGOs can build networks that transcend ethnic and citizenship barriers, promoting mutual support and empathy (Ng, 2024). These movements collectively challenge colonial and neocolonial integration models, advocating for a more just and equitable approach that respects the rights and freedoms of refugees (Ogutu, 2024). Overall, social solidarity movements in the Global South are crucial in shaping the integration of refugees by leveraging cultural, religious, and community ties to create more inclusive societies.

The media landscape in Pakistan plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Afghan refugees, often contributing to the politics of othering

and affecting social solidarity. Critical Discourse Analysis of Pakistani media reveals systematic "othering" of Afghan refugees, employing linguistic strategies that exclude refugee voices and legitimize state policies during crises (Urooj et al., 2025). This media portrayal is influenced by the political stance of the Pakistani state, which has shifted towards a more conflict-escalatory frame, reflecting state policies on forced repatriation (Jehangir, 2023). The historical context of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, dating back to the Soviet invasion, has seen Pakistan bearing the humanitarian and economic costs largely unsupported by international stakeholders, which has exacerbated the situation (Bukhari et al., 2025). The prolonged presence of Afghan refugees has led to socio-economic and political challenges, particularly in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where cultural and linguistic ties exist (Khan et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, the media's framing often emphasizes refugees as an economic burden, overshadowing their humanitarian plight (Khan et al., 2022). The forced repatriation measures by Pakistani authorities, supported by anti-refugee sentiment, further compromise the safety and rights of Afghan refugees, breaching international principles like non-refoulement (Badalič, 2019). While some media outlets occasionally employ peace-oriented frames, the dominant narrative remains politicized and inflammatory, marginalizing refugee voices (Ishaq, 2022). This complex media portrayal underscores the need for comprehensive policy reforms and regional cooperation to address the refugee crisis sustainably, promoting both national stability and refugee resilience (Noor et al., 2025).

Balochistan's role as a primary entry and settlement region for Afghan refugees since the 1980s has significantly influenced its socio-economic landscape and social dynamics. The influx of approximately 4.2 million Afghan refugees, particularly after the Soviet invasion in 1979, has strained local resources, impacting public services, housing, and healthcare in both Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ali et al., 2025; Hashmi et al., 2025). While the presence of refugees has introduced challenges such as increased competition for jobs and social issues, it has also fostered deep social interactions between host communities and refugees, leading to complex socio-political dynamics (Khan et al., 2021; Noor et al., 2025). Despite concerns regarding security and resource allocation, studies indicate that the majority of refugees are non-violent and contribute positively to the economy, highlighting the need for comprehensive policy reforms that promote integration and address humanitarian needs (Hashmi et al., 2025; Weinbaum, 2019).

This study is guided by three interrelated objectives that shape the overall research direction. First, it seeks to explore how media stories and language construct refugees either as "one of us," invoking sentiments of social solidarity, or as "different from us," reinforcing processes of othering. Understanding these representational practices is fundamental to revealing how narratives of inclusion and exclusion are circulated within public discourse. Second, the study examines how Afghan refugees themselves interpret and internalize these media portrayals, and how such representations influence their emotions, sense of identity, and everyday experiences as a long-term refugee population. Their perspectives offer critical insight into the lived consequences of media framing. Third, the study investigates how policymakers draw upon or strategically deploy media narratives of solidarity and othering when designing, defending, or implementing refugee-related policies. By engaging these three inquiries

together, the research deepens understanding of the dynamic interplay between media representation, public perception, and policy formation, particularly within the protracted refugee-hosting environment of Balochistan.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Global Research on Solidarity and Humanitarian Framing

Global research on solidarity and humanitarian framing reveals diverse approaches shaped by cultural, political, and economic contexts. For instance, organizations advocating for East Timor employed distinct motivational frames: Canadian groups emphasized humanitarian peacekeeping, U.S. activists highlighted democratic exceptionalism, and Australian advocates invoked a moral debt narrative, illustrating how national identity influences solidarity efforts (Torelli & Drago, 2023). Concurrently, European social movements have adapted their solidarity practices in response to crises, focusing on migrant rights, housing, and care, thereby reimagining citizenship and activism in local contexts (Schwiertz et al., 2025). Furthermore, Brazil's humanitarian intervention in Haiti exemplifies a shift towards a legal paradigm of solidarity that prioritizes transnational public policy over mere military or material aid (Alves, 2008). These findings underscore the complexity of solidarity, which varies significantly across nations and is influenced by factors such as wealth and climate, challenging the notion that affluence uniformly fosters altruism (Vliert & Lindenberg, 2006).

2.2. Political Othering and Securitization

Political othering and securitization are interlinked processes that manifest through the framing of specific groups as existential threats, thereby justifying extraordinary measures against them. In the context of Ukraine, the securitization of internally displaced persons (IDPs) post-2014 illustrates how othering practices, such as labeling IDPs as "suspicious" citizens, can institutionalize their marginalization while simultaneously paving the way for desecuritization through legal reforms (Jaroszewicz & Grzymski, 2023). Similarly, the integration of British Muslims has been characterized by a "politics of unease," where they are othered as potential threats rather than fully integrated citizens, reflecting a broader trend of securitization that inhibits genuine inclusion (Çilingir, 2020). Furthermore, the construction of enemy images in political discourse can lead to the justification of extreme measures against perceived threats, as seen in the narratives surrounding the Ukraine crisis (Гауфман, 2016). Overall, these dynamics reveal how political interests shape the securitization process, often sidelining democratic norms in favor of security imperatives (Cardinale, 2017; Jan, 2025).

2.3. The Global South: Under-Researched Contexts

The Global South, encompassing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, presents a complex landscape of social solidarity and political othering, particularly in the context of migration and transnational movements. Migrants within this region often engage in meso-level organizing, forming solidarity networks that challenge xenophobia and promote collective rights, as highlighted this study (Awumbila et al., 2023). This solidarity is not merely reactive but is rooted in historical experiences of collaboration among former colonial states, which have developed mechanisms for joint action to address socio-political challenges, including poverty and climate change (Yakovlev, 2021). Furthermore, the evolution of transnational solidarity movements, particularly in Latin America, illustrates how these networks have historically

mobilized against imperialism and for civil rights, emphasizing the importance of South-South connections in shaping political narratives and agency (Hatzky & Mor, 2014; Thomas, 2024). Overall, the Global South's engagement in solidarity movements reflects a dynamic interplay of resistance and cooperation, crucial for addressing contemporary global challenges.

2.4. Media Influence on Public Opinion and Policy

Media significantly influences public opinion and policy, particularly in contexts of social solidarity, political othering, and securitization. The framing of the "refugee crisis" in European media illustrates this dynamic, where narratives shifted from humanitarianism to fear and securitization, impacting public perceptions and policy responses (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). Similarly, the concept of securitization in media highlights how specific narratives can manipulate public opinion, as evidenced by the U.S. "war on terror," where the right framing can amplify security concerns and alter public sentiment (Vultee, 2010). Furthermore, media serves as a critical tool in shaping democratic consciousness and public policy, influencing how vulnerable populations are perceived and treated (Díaz, 2012; Yilmaz, 2013). While media can reflect public preferences, it also plays a role in shaping them, suggesting a complex interplay between media content and political dynamics (Wlezien & Soroka, 2023).

2.5. Refugee Voices in Media Research

Research on refugee voices in media highlights the complexities of representation and the importance of context in understanding their narratives. Trujillo emphasizes the need for reflexivity in research involving unaccompanied refugee minors, arguing that the meanings of their voices are deeply rooted in their specific contexts, which can prevent misrepresentation (Trujillo, 2017). Seo and Kavakli's meta-analysis reveals a significant increase in studies on media representations of refugees since 2010, yet notes a lack of research in countries hosting large refugee populations, indicating a gap in understanding diverse experiences (Seo & Kavakli, 2022). McLoughlin discusses how community-based media initiatives, like ReFOCUS Media Labs, empower refugees to share their stories, challenging dominant narratives and fostering agency (McLoughlin, 2023). Godin and Doná explore how new social media platforms allow refugees to assert their voices and engage in activism, countering traditional, often de-contextualized portrayals (Godin & Doná, 2016). Lastly, Kaukko and Wilkinson advocate for methodologies that prioritize the perspectives of refugee youth, aiming to amplify their voices and address epistemic injustices in research (Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2023). Together, these studies underscore the critical role of context, agency, and innovative media practices in shaping the representation of refugee voices.

3. Material and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how Afghan refugee community elders interpret media portrayals of refugees and how these narratives shape their experiences, identities, and perceptions of government policies. The research was conducted in Balochistan, a province that hosts a large number of Afghan refugees across both official and informal settlements. The population for the study consisted of Afghan refugees residing in the province for several decades, particularly community elders who have witnessed shifting political climates and evolving media narratives over time. Purposive sampling was used to select twelve Afghan refugee community elders who were

considered knowledgeable about the social and political experiences of their communities. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to share personal interpretations and experiences in detail. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a location chosen by the participant to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data. This involved stages of familiarization, coding, identifying patterns, and developing overarching themes that addressed the research objectives. Thematic analysis was particularly suited for this study because it allowed for capturing complex and nuanced understandings of media representation while grounding the analysis in the lived experiences of refugees.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Media as a Source of Conditional Solidarity

Participants highlighted that media representations of refugees often provide conditional solidarity, which appears during specific events such as natural disasters, humanitarian crises, or moments of diplomatic cooperation. During these periods, media narratives temporarily frame refugees as deserving of compassion and support. One participant explained, "Sometimes the news channels show our suffering and say that Afghan refugees are our brothers. But this feeling does not last. After a few days, the same media starts blaming us again. It feels like we are only humans when they need to show sympathy." The accounts indicate that such solidarity is inconsistent and instrumental, serving political, social, or commercial interests rather than reflecting a sustained commitment to refugee well-being. Participants noted that the fleeting nature of positive media coverage creates emotional uncertainty, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and conditional acceptance. As one participant remarked, "The attention comes and goes, and when it fades, so does the public's empathy. It's as if our value is measured by how convenient our suffering is to show."

Participants further emphasized that the instrumental use of humanitarian discourse in media can reinforce stereotypes and cycles of blame. Positive narratives are quickly replaced by stories that cast refugees as threats or burdens, highlighting the transactional nature of public sympathy. One participant observed, "One day they call us brothers; the next day we are scapegoats again. The media decides when we are human, and it feels very unfair." Overall, participant insights reveal that media plays a dual role: while it can temporarily mobilize compassion and attention toward refugee communities, this solidarity is conditional and transient. The findings highlight how emotional responses to media narratives are shaped by strategic timing and framing, underscoring the instrumental use of humanitarian discourse in constructing public perceptions of migrants and refugees.

4.2. Intensification of Othering during Political Tension

Participants observed that negative portrayals of refugees and migrants intensify during periods of political instability, economic uncertainty, or social unrest. During such times, refugees are frequently framed as security threats, criminals, or outsiders responsible for broader societal problems. One participant shared, "When there is any crime or political problem, the media quickly says 'Afghan refugees are involved.' They do not wait for evidence. This creates fear among people and makes us feel unsafe even outside our homes." Participants emphasized that these portrayals exacerbate social distrust and contribute to the

stigmatization of entire communities. The repeated association of refugees with crime or instability reinforces existing prejudices and heightens feelings of vulnerability among displaced populations. Many participants highlighted that these narratives also serve to legitimize harsh governmental measures, including surveillance, restrictive policies, and repatriation campaigns. As one participant noted, "The blame always comes back to us. It makes people suspicious and gives the government an excuse to act harshly."

Additionally, participants highlighted the role of media in amplifying these narratives during crises. They reported that sensationalized reporting during political or economic tension magnifies fear, often overshadowing positive contributions of migrant communities. One participant explained, "Even when we are doing normal jobs or helping our communities, all anyone sees during these times are accusations and warnings about us. It makes life tense everywhere." Overall, participant accounts reveal that political and economic crises intensify othering processes, creating cycles of fear, marginalization, and policy responses that disproportionately target refugees. These findings indicate that public perception and government action are closely tied to the framing of migrants during times of instability, illustrating how vulnerability is socially constructed and politically manipulated.

4.3. Stereotypes and Public Misunderstanding

Participants highlighted that media narratives play a central role in reproducing stereotypes about refugees, significantly shaping public perceptions and everyday social interactions. According to their accounts, these portrayals often depict Afghan refugees as uneducated, violent, or unwilling to comply with laws, creating a generalized and misleading image of entire communities. One refugee elder explained, "After watching television, people already decide who we are. They think we are uneducated, violent, or unwilling to follow laws. Media stories become people's truth, even if they have never met us personally." Participants emphasized that these stereotypes extend beyond perception into lived experience, influencing social treatment, access to services, and integration opportunities. They reported that host communities frequently base their judgments on media representations rather than direct interactions, leading to mistrust and marginalization. One participant stated, "People assume the worst before even talking to you. The media shapes their thinking, and it affects how we are treated in schools, markets, and neighborhoods."

Many participants also noted the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to stereotypical portrayals. Constant negative framing, they argued, reinforces societal biases and normalizes exclusionary attitudes. As one participant remarked, "When these stories are repeated every day, it feels like everyone believes them. It makes it hard to change minds or show who we really are." Overall, participant narratives reveal that media not only reflects but actively constructs imagined identities of refugees, deeply influencing social perceptions and interactions. The findings underscore the powerful role of media in shaping public understanding, highlighting how stereotypes contribute to social exclusion, mistrust, and the reinforcement of marginalization.

4.4. Emotional Impact and Identity Struggles

Participants highlighted the profound emotional and psychological effects of negative media portrayals on refugees and their families. They described experiencing fear, shame, insecurity, and frustration when confronted with hostile narratives that depict them as outsiders or threats. One participant

reflected on the intergenerational impact, stating, "When the media speaks badly about us, our children ask why Pakistan does not want us. It hurts us as parents. The young generation starts questioning their identity because they see themselves being rejected on screens every day."

Participants explained that repeated exposure to negative framing contributes to identity struggles, particularly among second-generation youth. Children and adolescents internalize these portrayals, leading to feelings of marginalization and fragmented self-perception. As one participant noted, "Even if we tell our kids they belong here, seeing negative stories on TV makes them doubt themselves. They wonder if they are really part of this society." These narratives, participants emphasized, shape not only public attitudes but also personal and collective senses of belonging.

The accounts also revealed that emotional impacts are compounded by the daily realities of social exclusion and discrimination. Participants described a cycle in which negative media reinforces societal prejudice, which in turn deepens emotional distress and identity questioning. One participant observed, "It is exhausting to live under constant suspicion and blame. The media just reminds us every day that we are not fully accepted." Overall, participant narratives indicate that media othering has significant consequences for emotional well-being and identity formation. Negative portrayals contribute to intergenerational identity struggles, shaping how refugees perceive themselves and how they navigate social spaces. These findings highlight the psychological dimensions of media-driven marginalization and the lasting effects of persistent stigmatization on refugee communities.

4.5. Use of Media Narratives in Policy Justification

Participants highlighted that government officials often rely on media narratives to justify policy decisions affecting refugees. They described a close interplay between political agendas and media discourse, where negative portrayals of refugees are leveraged to support restrictive measures, repatriation campaigns, or blame-shifting during periods of political or economic crisis. One participant noted, "When the government wants to send refugees back or make new rules, they use the same stories the media spreads. They say refugees are a threat, so people accept the policy. Media and government support each other." Participants explained that this symbiotic relationship between media and policymakers amplifies public acceptance of exclusionary policies. By framing refugees as security risks or societal burdens, authorities can legitimize actions that might otherwise provoke resistance or criticism. As one participant remarked, "It becomes easy for them to pass harsh rules because everyone already believes the media's story about us."

Several participants emphasized that this mechanism reinforces cycles of marginalization. The public, exposed to repeated negative narratives, internalizes fears and prejudices, which are then cited by policymakers as justification for further restrictive measures. One participant observed, "The media sets the story, people believe it, and the government says, 'See, the people want this.' It all works together to control us." Overall, participant narratives reveal that media is not merely a reflection of public opinion but an active tool in policy legitimation. The findings underscore how political authorities exploit media narratives to shape perceptions, garner public compliance, and reinforce restrictive measures, demonstrating the instrumental role of media in advancing policy agendas related to refugee governance.

5. Conclusions

This study explored how Afghan refugee community elders in Balochistan interpret media representations and how these portrayals shape their social experiences, emotional well-being, and perceptions of policymaking. The findings demonstrate that media narratives oscillate between solidarity and othering, producing complex impacts on refugee lives. While humanitarian framing occasionally generates empathy and a sense of shared identity, such solidarity is inconsistent and often overshadowed by negative portrayals that frame refugees as threats, burdens, or outsiders. These narratives reinforce stereotypes within host communities, contributing to social tension and limiting refugees' sense of belonging. The emotional effects of othering are profound, particularly for younger generations who struggle with identity and acceptance. Importantly, the study reveals that policymakers actively draw upon media-generated narratives to justify decisions related to documentation, repatriation, and security measures. This indicates a mutually reinforcing relationship between media discourse and political agendas. Understanding this interplay is crucial, especially in a context like Balochistan where refugee–host relations are shaped by decades of political, cultural, and economic interactions. The study underscores the need for responsible journalism that recognizes refugees as complex individuals rather than political symbols. Ethical media practices, combined with inclusive policymaking, can contribute to improved social cohesion and foster a more nuanced public understanding of refugee experiences. Future research should further examine youth perspectives, intergenerational identity formation, and the role of digital media in shaping contemporary refugee narratives.

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