



# Visual Framing and Migrant Discourses in Social Media: The Story of Idomeni on Instagram

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## INTRODUCTION

The transnational discourse about the migration and refugee crisis spans across intersecting media technologies which shape political narratives. With the rising popularity of social networking media dedicated to visual content

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such as Instagram, images are essential to public communication about the issue (Wilmott 2017). Visuals of migrants and refugees are impactful devices in framing process; examples are photos of refugees on boats, at beaches, in camps, in trains, or at borders and pictures of the injured and dead (including children). There are also memes and “humorous” visuals that dehumanise refugees. Visual content is integral to the discourse and images trigger emotions and controversy within a highly volatile political context (Proitz 2017).

The migration and refugee crisis polarised the European Union (EU). In Germany, the government’s emphasis on a welcoming culture was accompanied by the rise of populist movements at the political (far-)right such as *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) or *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA). In France, right-wing party Front National gained popularity with xenophobic themes; fear of real and imagined cultural, social, and economic challenges drive this development. In Britain, migration was an important factor in the referendum on the country’s eventual “Brexit”. Similar developments emerged across Europe. However, countries like Turkey, Greece, Spain, and Italy carried most of the weight in the refugee crisis. It is in places like Akçakale, Lampedusa, and Idomeni that many refugees first arrived (Zaragosa-Cristiani 2017). In these places, xenophobic reactions also emerged quickly.

The refugee crisis triggered a controversy over practical challenges, ethical concerns, causes, responsibilities, and strategies. The conflicts separate stakeholders along political-ideological and national(istic) lines, while the crisis revealed a lack of coordination and consensus in the EU (The Lancet 2016; Grigonis 2017). Framing in political communication tends to exclude refugee perspectives and can resort to plain racism (Nail 2015, Mig@Net 2016). The discourse was heavily mediated, as the refugee crisis took turns with the Eurozone crisis as the primary topic on the transnational public agenda (Nguyen 2017).

Social networking media are new sites for communicating frames (Entman and Usher 2018) and transform public communication (Karatogianni 2006; Hepp 2016). Digital public discourses emerge as “web spheres” (Schneider and Foot 2006; Nguyen 2016) that consist of online communication related to a common topic and form distinguishable contexts; the refugee crisis served as such a connecting factor and triggered the formation of a refugee crisis web sphere (Karatogianni et al. 2016). Social networking media offer direct access to these online discourses, which can be scanned for political conflict constellations and framing trends with content and network analyses (Nguyen 2016) based on digital methods (Rogers 2015, 2019).

Visual communication is essential to framing; images convey information quicker than words and easily trigger emotions. A flood of images documented the refugee crisis in social networking media. This raises questions about the dynamics behind these processes: who creates and shares visual content about the crisis? How does visual content portray and frame social groups in the refugee crisis?

The present study uses mixed methods for analysing data retrieved from Instagram as a platform for visual content with over 800 million users in 2017; though leisure, consumer, and private content are dominant, visuals about current events and crises are posted there, too. The present study explores how participants framed the crisis via hashtagging and what narratives they shared in visual content. The analysis focuses on the usage of Instagram within the vicinity of the refugee camp in Idomeni, Greece, in March 2016. The study has two research questions:

1. What hashtags did Instagram users in Idomeni choose during the height of the refugee crisis in 2016?
2. What framing(s) of the refugee crisis did participants convey through visual communication on Instagram in Idomeni?

The now de-functional *Instagram Hashtag Explorer* (IHE) (Digital Methods Initiative 2016) collected Instagram posts within a five-kilometre radius of Idomeni that were uploaded between 7 and 15 March 2016. The tool collected data for specific locations with longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates. During the selected timespan, the refugee camp in Idomeni made news for the rapid influx of arrivals from Syria (BBC 2016). The data include 367 images paired with 552 hashtags that were shared by 189 user accounts. The image data were processed in a quantitative-qualitative content analysis to identify central themes, while the hashtag data and user data were analysed and visualised with Gephi ([www.gephi.org](http://www.gephi.org)). The findings of the empirical-descriptive analysis are contextualised with theories on visual framing and transnational web spheres.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING MEDIA IN THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Social networking media combine private, semi-public, and public levels of visibility and accessibility (Nguyen 2017); individuals and groups discuss issues of societal relevance and potentially attract large audiences. Participants construct identities and discuss meaning and responsibilities,

diagnose problems, negotiate morals and ethics, and propose solutions (Entman 1993). The content of digital public spheres is shaped by the underlying technological framework. Media convergence makes online discourses diverse in terms of communication (Meikle and Young 2011): users can write posts, record audio messages and/or videos, and post images, memes, and other transmedia. Users contribute to a diverse web sphere that is shaped by websites, blogs, social networking media, YouTube videos, podcasts, and so on. However, transnational digital public spheres do not embrace normative ideas of reason-based deliberation as proposed in democratic theory (Nguyen 2017; Sunstein 2018); instead, web spheres become heatedly contested sites for political struggle. Examples include the rise of the Alt-Right (Lamerichs et al. 2018), Gamergate, or Brexit.

Social networking media serve a variety of goals for different communicators in the migration and refugee crisis context. These communicators might include political movements, mainstream media, political institutions, and migrants/refugees. Political movements use social media to frame issues and goals, coordinate collective actions, and promote activism (Gerbaudo 2018; Gerbaudo 2012; Freelon et al. 2018). Social networking media were crucial for not only Occupy and Black Lives Matter but also the nationalistic PEGIDA movement, indicating that groups from across the political spectrum use them. For example, more extreme groups spread plain propaganda in the form of, for example, fake news in an attempt to dehumanise migrants and refugees.

Mainstream media use social networking media to distribute content, increase subscription numbers, find stories and sources, and also interact with audiences (Brands et al. 2018), while news media companies and journalists tend to communicate in a top-down fashion to increase reach and exposure. Political institutions, governments, and political parties use social networking media for public information, public relations, and political marketing (Nguyen 2017). Similarly, European governments use social networking media to comment on the crisis and provide information about related topics such as misinformation about migration policies.

Migrants and refugees may display the most multi-layered use of social networking media. First, they use them to plan and monitor their journeys (Dekker et al. 2018; Borkert et al. 2018), with trips often starting by finding smugglers via the web. Second, they document their journeys with mobile devices and, if they have Internet access, share their experiences with families and friends and occasionally a wider public (Leurs 2017). Third, social networking media and mobile technology are crucial for

maintaining social ties over long distances and enable the formation of digital transnational communities that stretch between home and guest countries (Dekker and Engbersen 2013; Gillespie et al. 2016a, b, 2018; Kok and Rogers 2017).

Social networking media are integral for the coordination and documentation of migration flows, including refugee journeys from conflict zones to safety abroad. They are tools and sites for political discourses where individuals and groups observe and comment on crisis developments. If the refugee crisis is heavily mediated through a quasi-permanent news coverage, then it is simultaneously heavily digitalised. This includes all political angles, mainstream media organisations, governments, movements, and small communities. Audiences are active content producers by engaging in social networking media debates about crisis-related issues (Boukala and Dimitrikopoulou 2017).

What all of them share is that through communication they (a) take a stance on the migration and refugee crisis and (b) build in-groups and out-groups, that is contribute to the formation of their own group identities but, as in the case of most migrants and refugees, also become subject of portrayals from the outside.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING MEDIA AND VISUAL FRAMING

Research on frames and framing remains relevant in online media-driven public communication (Nguyen 2017). Political online communication *is* framing as stakeholders present views on social, cultural, and economic issues. Digital platforms facilitate content creation and sharing in dynamic networks with potentially global reach. They circumvent, challenge, and influence mass media agendas.

Framing in online media serves in raising awareness, constructing identities and communities, mobilising activists, attacking opponents, and spreading worldviews (Hamdy & Gomaa 2012). During the European crises of the 2010s, that is the financial/economic crisis, the political crisis, and the refugee crisis, framing in the web sphere remained a highly urgent topic and a number of studies focused on transnational conflict constellations, protests, and perceptions of migrants and refugees (Nguyen 2016; Ferrá and Nguyen 2017; Siapera et al. 2018). According to Entman and Usher (2018) social networking media fundamentally changed framing in public communication; they point to five factors that influence framing in networked societies: “platforms, analytics, algorithms,

ideological media, and rogue actors”; these transform the “relationships among elites, traditional media, and individuals” (Entman and Usher 2018).

Frame and framing analyses map social constellations, communicative dynamics, discursive practices, and implementation of technology (Krippendorff 2018), while methodological approaches for empirical research are diverse (Matthes 2014). Entman proposes a useful work definition: he argues that framing “essentially involves *selection and salience*. To frame in media texts is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described” (Entman 1993, 52, original italics). This is easily transferable to other media types, including online versions (Nguyen 2017). However, this approach misses a specific link to visual framing.

Coleman proposes a workable but limited definition for visual framing in news content: first, she defines visual content as “media content that is processed by the eye alone” (2010, 285), which includes pictures/photographs, footage, infographics, maps, drawings, colours, facial expressions, posture, and gestures. This ignores hybrid forms of visual and audio content such as videos and, more recently, web formats such as vlogs. She concludes that both dimensions are important to consider in empirical research but that eventually visuals can become subjects of separate analysis as long as the observations are contextualised in relation to other connected communication means within a mixed format (Coleman 2010, 286). She then links visual content to Entman’s definition of framing by arguing that in taking or creating a picture and selecting and editing it, communicators emphasise a specific aspect of “perceived reality” to promote a problem definition, causal relationship, moral evaluation, assignment of responsibility, and recommendation of action (Coleman 2010, 286, citing Entman 1993, 52).

Analysing visual framing asks for critical reflections on visual content with the help of, for example, Gestalt theory, semiotics, visual rhetoric, and camera techniques (van den Broek et al. 2012; Coleman 2010; Grabe and Bucy 2009). In social networking media, additional aspects are network dynamics behind creating and sharing visual content and hashtagging as a discursive practice. The latter has two functions: categorising content and conveying cultural, social, and political meaning (Ferra and Nguyen 2017), as seen in, for example, the *#metoo* movement. Hashtags

(and captions) coordinate discussions and reveal dominant frames in an online discourse.

Existing research provides reference points for categorising content about migrants and refugees and identifying frames. For example, de Vreese's list of generic frames (2005) enables a quick analysis of media texts; he distinguishes between conflict, economic, human impact, responsibility, and morality frames. Texts include several of these but can emphasise one over the other. Specific research on media coverage of migrants and refugees demonstrates that representations fall into a few reductive categories: first, the image of innocent, passive victims in need of help and protection; second, migrants and refugees as intruders who threaten the physical, economic, and cultural stability of the host country; third, refugees/migrants as faceless crowds (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2016; Gillespie et al. 2018; Giannakopoulos and Anagnostopoulos, 2016; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2015; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti 2016; Vaughan-Williams 2015). These frames emerge over time and across countries (Horsti 2008; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2015).

Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) offer a semiotic analysis of news images from which they derive different "regimes of visibilities", each evaluated on the articulation of "dispositions of responsibility" towards refugees: visibility of biological life, associated with monitorial action; visibility as empathy, associated with charitable action; visibility as a threat, associated with a state security; visibility as hospitality, associated with political activism; visibility as self-reflexivity, associated with a post-humanitarian engagement. Mainstream media often fail to humanise refugees and migrants; instead, they remain subjects unable to articulate their narratives. This asks for radically rethinking effects of media portrayals and responsibility. A different news media imagery is necessary to broaden the scope of "ethico-political proposals for action" (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1163) and discussions should shift from "visual framing" to "visual framing and responsibility". Frames are "tactically interchangeable moral claims [...] shifting and unstable" (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017). Empathy might prevail in one moment (e.g. the death of Alan Kurdi), only to give way to fear and outrage in the next (e.g. terrorism). A recent Council of Europe report (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2016) notes this shift in European attitudes from "careful tolerance" to "ecstatic humanity" to "fear and securitization".

However, counter-developments and frames are emerging. Social networking media are a tool with a capacity to not only engage, connect, and trigger compassion between refugees/migrants and citizens but also reframe dominant narratives “from the margins” (Mihailidis et al. 2016). There is a growing body of literature that critically reflects on and analyses self-representation/self-framing practices of refugees in Europe (Chouliaraki 2017; Nikunen 2018a; Risam 2018), exploring the potential and limitations of “selfies activism” (Nikunen 2018a). The ethics of migrants’ selfies concern their struggle for visibility in Western media, where they are “typically ‘othered’, mistrusted and feared” (Leurs 2017, 680). Since “selfies” are “representations” (rather than “self-portraits”), they are “re-signified” in the process of circulation and re-circulation across different socio-technical systems (Chouliaraki 2017). Hence, Chouliaraki raises the question of what it means for a selfie to reach “circulated vertically” from social networks to Western “dominant visual economies”/mainstream news channels (ibid.) (e.g. news coverage that includes a photo of a person who takes a selfie).

When refugees take a selfie, they are not the “objects” of the produced image. They share it with the “outside” and “independent” of the mainstream media channels, which gives them “agency” (Risam 2018). Furthermore, it allows for self-documentation /self-archiving (ibid., 70). Digital archives of young migrants form rich empirical and historical data of their “collective experiences, feeling traumas and aspirations” (Leurs 2017, 675). Especially young migrants who grew up with digital devices use them to exercise their communications rights and develop their own vernacular for documenting their experiences.

However, access to digital devices and social media does not always mean to have a “voice” in public discourse (Nikunen 2018b). Social media is a contested place, excessively commercialised and consumption-driven, hosting growing alt-right and racist discourses (Lamerichs et al. 2018). Furthermore, although technologies can be empowering for migrants, mobility of migrant bodies enabled by locative media also renders them vulnerable: they can be “tracked and traced”, for example, via state surveillance (Sánchez-Querubín and Rogers 2018, 10).

Visual framing is central to communication processes in social networking media, covering at least three dimensions to consider: the technological infrastructure of the social networking media platform (functionality, means for content production and sharing, hashtagging), the visuals themselves in terms of appearance and elements, and the content level,



that is the actual ideas, sentiments, and emotions evoked through statements and narratives. Previous research on news media framing facilitates the identification of generic and issue-specific frames in the migration and refugee crisis, while Entman's and Chouliaraki and Stolic's (2017) propositions allow determining concrete themes and topics.

## METHOD AND DATA

The present study builds on the tools and practices of the Digital Methods Initiative at the University of Amsterdam. Digital methods learn *from* the medium (Rogers 2017). Methods embedded in digital devices and their output data are reimagined and repurposed for research of society and culture (Rogers 2009, 2017, 2019).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected with the now defunct *Instagram Hashtag Explorer* (IHE), later renamed *Visual Tagnet Explorer* (VTE). The tool could be described as a script that connects to Instagram's application programming interface (API) with user credentials and collects datasets based on specific keywords or hashtags, including meta-data on postings on the platform. Alternatively, users could enter longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates and collect data about uploaded posts for specific locations. The final data collection was completed just before Instagram imposed heavy restrictions to its API in June 2016. VTE documentation became a "case not allowed on the platform" (Rieder 2016), along with many other tools such as NodeXL and Netlytic. This raises questions about the replicability of this research design (data were no longer retrievable in the same way), and the broader question of accessibility for social science and humanities researchers who want to work with data native to the Internet (*ibid.*). APIs are "protocological objects" that enact protocological control through their rules and regulations (Snodgrass & Soon 2019). Considering extensive "web platformisation" (Helmond 2015) and concentration of control over technological infrastructure and data that are collected by dominant platforms, access to APIs becomes crucial and the only way to scrutinise "the opaque insides of the platform" (Snodgrass & Soon 2019). Hence, access to APIs has also become a question of legitimacy, ethics, and citizens' right to know the effects social networking platforms have on "publics", as much as their right to "data privacy"

(Rieder 2016). In sum, API policies put severe limitations on the reproducibility of data collection processes but not necessarily analyses if researchers preserve the datasets and provide access.

### *Instagram Data*

Instagram focuses on visual content and shows increasing relevance for political discourses. Users share pictures, short videos (“stories”) and the like, share and comment on uploads, while, at the same time, they also create networks. Compared to other social networking platforms, Instagram has not been extensively researched (Highfield and Leaver 2015) and only few studies have focused on the platform’s role in the migration and refugee crisis (Chouliaraki 2017; Guidry et al. 2018), using digital methods (Geboers et al. 2016; Sánchez-Querubín and Rogers 2018).

A key feature of Instagram is tagging. Tags (keywords) sort content and structure online discourses. They are part of the technical infrastructure of the digital public sphere by enabling interconnection and raising the findability of content that includes information with the potential of framing issues (Ferra and Nguyen 2017). On Instagram, tagging is crucial for achieving visibility and exposure of uploaded content. Furthermore, tags carry their own meanings and are able to communicate a worldview and/or political stance, and therefore they form framing devices. This can be seen in examples such as #MAGA, #blacklivesmatter, #metoo, and #refugeecrisis. Analysing tags reveals associations and evaluations that participants express. Other Instagram functions include image caption, mentioning, filtering, and user-/layman-friendly image editing, exploring, and mapping stories based on location which is a news-like function.

User-generated, on-location data provide insights to local experiences, while in the past such data were only retrievable via ethnographic research. The functionality of Instagram paired with digital methods offered an alternative for data collection and analysis. Location was the starting point and the *IHE/VTE* tool collected data via Instagram’s API for location-based uploads, that is Idomeni’s longitude and latitude, during the week between 7 March 2016 and 15 March 2016.

The research objective was to obtain a semantic map around the location through the lens of Instagram, while a primary goal was to explore hashtag usage, potentially representing “trends” that organically emerged from the location, and what actors were mobilised by the crisis. Focus was

laid on local resonances communicated via visual content on Instagram. A timeline of posts reconstructs the chronology of events as captured by users. This provides access to their perceptions of the crisis. Mapping, categorising, and critically reflecting on this content further allows comparing Instagram to mainstream news coverage. Thus, the empirical part covers two steps: part one performs a co-hashtag network analysis and part two an image content analysis on visual framing.

Digital methods and online data have many advantages, but at the same time many limitations and strong critiques, some of which concern the lack of contextual and “first-hand” knowledge, points that are considered as strengths of traditional observations or ethnographic and participatory studies. Other debates and concerns concentrate on privacy as well as issues related with data collection techniques and features. For example, in order for a researcher to be able to collect data from a social media platform using an API-based tool, the first step is to create an account on the respective platform and, occasionally, to virtually be part of the community or platform of investigation. In ethnographic research this would mean opening a space for participation, which digital research often omits and where it remains distant. Very few studies that use digital data (social or web-based data) are “participatory” and invite subjects of a study to help with close reading (e.g. Leurs 2017). Furthermore, relying on API access shapes and delimits the kind of knowledge that digital research can generate. This takes place within the protocological and algorithmic boundaries of a platform. boyd and Crawford (2011) argue: “[d]ata might change the meaning of learning, and what new possibilities and new limitations may come with these systems of knowing”. However, more recently it has become crucial to explore what kind of research is still possible in the post-API environment from a digital methods viewpoint (Venturini et al. 2018).

### *Visual Framing Analysis*

The manual content analysis of the 367 images combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches. First, the researchers developed coding schemes and categories separately, and they then compared and aligned their findings. This process of consensual coding is typical for explorative research and allows casting a wide net that considers a broad range of observations during the first stages of the qualitative content analysis, which then were gradually reduced and clustered into general codes

(Mayring 2010; Kuckartz 2012; Krippendorff 2018). Some of the basic indicators which guided the analysis include content (what the visuals depicted), engagement (e.g. likes, shares, comments), user type (who took the photo vs. who is in the photo), and visual elements that synthesised the image (format, camera direction, and filters/stylistic treatment). The researchers then coded the material again according to the final codebook and conducted an intercoder reliability test for several variables using Krippendorff's alpha on a randomly selected sub-sample of approximately 10% of the images (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). The scores for engagement metrics were perfect (KALPHA = 1); the same applies to variables "groups/individual/crowds" (i.e. whether the images depict any of these three), "eye-contact" (i.e. whether subjects look directly into the camera), and "face visible" (simple yes/no). Scores diverged marginally but still reached satisfying levels for "user-type" (KALPHA = 0.82), "camera distance" (KALPHA = 0.8), "image format" (KALPHA = 0.79), and "generic theme" (human interest story, humanitarian disaster, securitisation; KALPHA = 0.81).

## FINDINGS

### *Part I: Co-hashtag Network Analysis*

Co-hashtag network analysis shows associated ideas, themes, issues, problems, and actors. This enables a quick identification of key topics and reveals the central conflict constellations and spectrum of viewpoints (Nguyen 2017).

Figure 1 shows the network of co-occurring hashtags. It consists of 552 nodes (hashtags) and 5737 edges (connections). Gephi's ForceAtlas2 algorithm spatialised data and determined clusters of hashtags frequently used together. The degree of co-occurrences defines the size of a node. Connections between hashtags indicate what keywords categorise uploads. *Edge weight*, a sum of reciprocal ties between two or more hashtags, indicates the relation/co-occurrence of hashtags; the thicker the edge, the stronger the connection. Figure 1 shows the top hashtag co-occurrences, that is hashtags that occur most often together in the same images. *#idomeni* was the most frequent hashtag, followed by two other locations which were included in the top ten, *#greece* and *#macedonia*. Half of the top ten tags were related to the refugee crisis: *#refugees*, *#refugeecrisis*, and *#refugeeswelcome*. The hashtag analysis shows that the image stream was

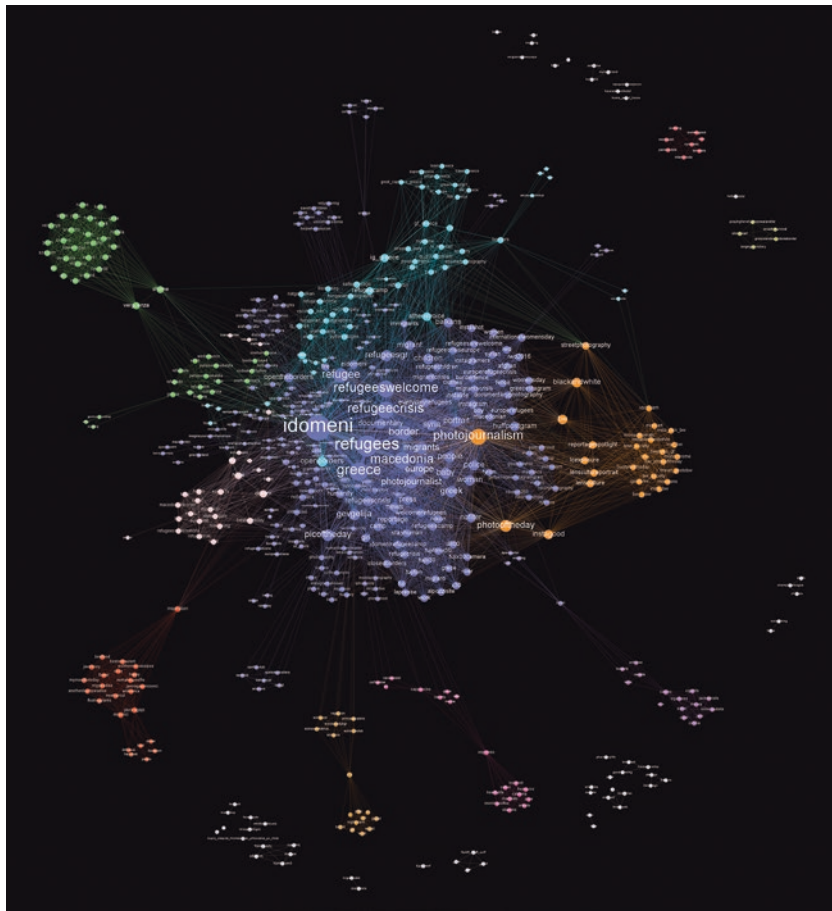


Fig. 1 Idomeni hashtag network

dominated by content related to refugees and migrants. The refugee camp pushed aside other content that is usually associated with location-related image uploads, like food, drinks, and places to visit.

Hashtags like *#europe*, *#border*, and *#opentheborders* highlight the transnational scope of the online discussion. It did not show any significant changes even after the original data collection, indicating that posting did not decline in the aftermath of the crisis, with *#idomeni* having over

10,000 posts as of November 2018, some of which are “reposts” from the months of the crisis, used as reminders of the events back in 2016.

### *Hashtags Groupings*

The hashtags *#refugeeswelcome* and *#shame* imply affective responses on Instagram, as they are used to express solidarity with and support to refugees and voice criticism towards the EU (e.g. *#shame*, *#EU*). *Idomeni* became a symbol for failed refugee politics and policies applied by the European institutions. Hashtags are framing devices that convey problem definitions, causal interpretations, and moral evaluations (Entman 1993). Seeing it through the lens of generic frames, it is possible to spot conflict, human impact, responsibility, and morality frames (de Vreese 2005). Other hashtags call for action or raise awareness for activities, for example, *#leaflet*, *#one-human-race*, and *#marchofhope*, indicating that Instagram is also used as a tool for both raising awareness and promotion or coordination of actions. Additionally, there was also a detached discourse which emerged in juxtaposition and focused on *#photojournalism*, choices related to aesthetics and art.

Another identified cluster of hashtags is less crisis related but rather platform driven, as there is no connection to the political and artistic discourses, but instead the use of these hashtags is motivated by the platform’s functionality. Relevant keywords include *#photooftheday*, *#picoftheday*, *#instalife*, *#instalike*, and *#tbt*. These are known as *big hashtags* with high levels of engagement. The main purpose of the use of these hashtags is to gain exposure for uploads, while Instagram encourages an inflated usage of these as a boost for post visibility (Fig. 2). These are not specific crisis-related frames and do not describe the content of the posts, but instead they illustrate how Instagram’s internal attention economy works. Instagram users apply them to promote their uploads and not to evoke particular framings. However, big hashtags can also be repurposed to attract attention and traffic to a social issue.

### *Part 2: Image Content Analysis*

Users uploaded a total of 367 images among which 232 (63.2%) have a clear connection to the refugee crisis. While the overall number of the uploaded images is considered to be small for the ecology of such popular social networking media platforms as Instagram, the majority of uploads



group of international freelance media professionals (from Germany, Hungary, the USA, and the UK).

Out of 232 images, 67 applied filtering or other forms of image treatment, and 10 of these were converted and uploaded as black and white images. Many of the images show children. Volunteers' images appear more interactive and express welcoming gestures in terms of closer angles, proximity, body language, and group photos (selfies with refugees). Images from media professionals are distinguishable by the quality of the images, cameras they use, and composition. Refugees typically used selfies as their image format to communicate to their families and friends that they are safe.

### *Visual Framing of the Crisis*

The analysis draws from Entman's (1993) and de Vreese's (2005) definitions of frames in news media texts, Coleman's (2010) take on visual framing, and Chouliaraki and Stolic's (2017) dispositions of responsibility, namely visibility of biological life and monitorial action; visibility as empathy and charitable action; visibility as a threat and state security; visibility as hospitality and political activism; and visibility as self-reflexivity and post-humanitarian engagement. The images were grouped based on similarities in content and the theoretical framework helped with finalising the frame categories.

Following this process, a number of frames emerged, starting with a *victimisation* frame with the subcategories *humanitarian disaster* frame (Fig. 3: taken from @dshakirov) and the *human-interest* frame. The former conveyed a humanitarian emergency situation by depicting the living conditions at the transit refugee camp at Idomeni's train station, which was flooded and turned into a muddy swamp after two days of torrential rains.

Wide shots expand the field of view and encompass the campsite in its disastrous totality. The images point at humanitarian urgency and portray the struggle with organising daily life for refugees. The annotations describe the conditions at the camp and imply bad or worsening conditions and evoke themes related to human suffering/human impact, morality, and responsibility.

The second group of images shows humanitarian aid (food supplies, volunteers, etc.). Captions report a lack of resources and organisation, while problems with the supply of food and medical provisions also stand





**Fig. 3** The humanitarian disaster frame cluster taken from @dshakirov

out. Refugees had to wait in long lines before any of the limited supplies were distributed and there were reports about diseases, such as hepatitis, and lice outbreaks. Several posts assign responsibility and make references to international politics via *#shame* and *#Europe*.

This cluster highlights the diversity of perspectives on Instagram that evoke the respective generic frames (de Vreese 2005). Another noticeable cluster forms the *human-interest* frame, linking back what Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) defined as “visibility as empathy” or, following de Vreese (2005), “human interest” frames. The humanity of the refugee subject is in focus through personal and group portraits with the camera at shorter

distance. Refugees were positioned as victims and pointing out a stranded existence deprived of basic human rights, adequate food, shelter, and health care. Other images show high spirits and endurance by portraying their pragmatism in establishing daily routines in the camp (e.g. hygiene and cooking). This *human-interest* frame includes a noticeable number of images of children, who, according to Save the Children (2016), constitute 40% of all refugees of the camp. This explains why 78 of the images in the dataset portrayed children. One of the annotations directly refers to this: “volunteers on site estimate one third of the people in the camp are minors”.

Another cluster shows *messages from Idomeni*. These uploads show that refugees (and perhaps volunteers /activists) themselves comment on current events and take a stand in the discourse. This implies that Instagram could support minority groups in establishing agency in debates that are usually about but not with them. Next, the *securitisation* frame includes images of anticipating refugee crowds, rioting and/or protesting groups, police force, and border fences/barbed wire fences which marked the border crossing. Immersive camera angles of the protests and river-crossing scenes conveyed dramatic impact and immediacy. This immediacy is characteristic of mobile photography aesthetics and social networking media posts, especially those directly taken by smartphones, and it has a connotation of eye-witnessing of events. The *solidarity* frame refers to photos taken by volunteers and activists that show engagement and interaction with refugees

A couple of images amount to “visibility as self-reflectivity” (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017), a frame characterised by “playful reflexivity” of social networking media graphics or involving celebrities such as artist Ai Weiwei.

### *Aesthetics and Image Manipulation*

Finally, there is the creative-technical aspect to Instagram uploads. The platform offers 25 filters to alter digital images. A number of images had been filtered or edited for changing brightness, colours, saturation, warmth, and so on. This raises the question regarding the (Instagram) aesthetics through which the refugees’ situation is represented and/or provoke responses.

The black-and-white cluster is an example reflective of the aesthetic choice for black-and-white photography in documenting refugees. Scooping the recent #*Idomeni* photo stream (and three other related

hashtags: *#refugeeswelcome*, *#refugeesgr*, or *#Idomenirefugees*) returns a considerable number of black-and-white images, and *#blackandwhite* is one of the hashtags with the highest frequency, next to *#photojournalism*, in connection with *#Idomeni*. Additionally, it also returned a number of filtered or adjusted images. The documentation of refugees and migrants on Instagram is not reserved for professionals trained in photography but, instead, any user can share an observation or express an opinion through creative editing tools of the platform. This could lead to commodification, with the refugees' plight becoming a spectacle.

The refugee crisis is an emotional and complex subject and aesthetic manipulation might result in uniformity of images, which could lead to a reductive range of emotions and meanings communicated by image treatments with the effect of aestheticisation of the crisis (i.e. the refugee crisis as a subject of art). For example, some photos were complimented on their artistic composition or skills, which could shift the discussion away from political, social, and practical matters.

## DISCUSSION

The findings provide insight on how media and non-mainstream communicators transferred or developed discourse around the refugee crisis to social networking media, and specifically Instagram, while they also point out some of the associations and links among actors, events, and issues raised during the crisis (EU politics, racism, etc.). The analysis allows to conclude that there is a refugee and migration crisis web sphere, where Instagram visuals play a central role in documenting and commenting on the relevant political, social, and cultural—even artistic—developments. Instagram, one of the most popular social media platforms, became a site for serious political discourse.

Framing and networking analyses with digital methods facilitate the systematic exploration of these web spheres. The combination of these research and analytical approaches is particularly useful for the study of complicated and rich examples that demand a quantitative-qualitative perspective: the *VTE* is the digital tool that is used for the collection and categorisation of larger amounts of data automatically and facilitated the identification of trends in, for example, tagging practices, which here were also discursive and framing practices. Images convey meanings in complex ways that shift between manifest and latent dimensions and therefore require a closer study of the content within a qualitative content analytical

framework. In short, images are uploaded in large numbers but they are created, shared, and viewed from very subjective perspectives. Hence, a mixed methods approach is due, which is in fact one of the tenets of digital methods as coined by Rogers (2017).

The frames which were built and shared via images and annotations around the Idomeni camp did not vastly differ from mainstream media frames but were primarily concerned with human impact, transnational conflict constellations, ethics, and responsibility. Users raise and point to crisis-related issues, problems, and developments and implement visual and typed language to share opinion, statements, and judgements. Framing analysis shows that certain conventions that were perpetuated in mainstream news coverage also emerged in Instagram uploads, and even with slight variations, still similar frames were also circulated online. This, though, is not a great surprise considering the prevalence of media actors, who were either reporting for news agencies or freelance journalists or related with media.

Instagram allows non-media communicators and independent journalists to enter the stage. This platform expands and shapes the imagery associated with the refugee crisis and through real-time uploads from the ground serves as an alternative (or supplementary) source of news. However, the platform has significant limitations and lacks any means of quality control; therefore, each contributor needs to be closely scrutinised in terms of intentions and practices.

The examined dataset pointed out that refugees remained on the other side of the camera, retaining their status as subjects rather than actors. This raises the issue of voiceless refugees, a point of contention repeatedly mentioned in research about framing in the crisis. The refugee experience is a “prerogative of Western experts” (Rajaram 2002) that is always mediated, by journalists, photographers, anchors, and translators. The authentic, first-hand experiences of these people are rarely heard, and instead silenced with a “vigorous, transnational, largely philanthropic traffic of images and visual signs of refugeeness” (Malkki 1996). Images taken by volunteers and activist differ to some extent in that they are more spontaneous and interactive. Many of them are “selfies” taken together with refugees, expressive of solidarity and compassion. They “reverse the gaze”, so that refugees and volunteers/activist all become “equal” subjects in the images. These images were typically tagged with more “affective” groups of hashtags (e.g. *#welcome refugees*, *#solidarity*, *#wearcallhuman*).

Yet, this still “reserves humanising capacity of public visibility of refugees to Western actors” (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1170). Likewise, celebrities’ presence displaces the presence of refugees (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1171), undermining their agency and further amplifying their subjectification. Despite its potential for giving refugees a platform, they only occasionally make full use of it. It seems that refugees themselves are, to a large part, still excluded from the digital discourse, while there is limited evidence regarding direct forms of participation (e.g. refugee selfies). The few instances in which refugees take a more active stance indicate that they are well aware of the role of media attention, as seen in images of refugees holding self-made signs with critical messages. At this point it is also important to situate the present study in this field of tension. Here, refugees and migrants are mere data points, too, which raises ethical questions about consent, inclusion, and representation. As researchers, it is almost impossible not to look at people and their practices as “objects”, but to the contrary, a clear distance is expected, if not even mandatory. Maintaining distance throughout the research process allows researchers to clearly voice normative criticism that is based on objective assessment, which, if high standards for research practices are met, give academic studies a strength that media discourses, while not entirely impossible for them, often cannot reach.

Tendencies towards aestheticisation and manipulation need further critical reflection. Future research may collect a much larger data volume for identifying widespread aesthetic techniques and categorise visuals of the crisis accordingly. Big data research that pairs up with insights for visual analysis and critique from the humanities could be one way. But with less open access to social media data, options for researchers are severely limited. Future studies should follow an essential assertion of digital methods in this regard: continuously assessing “what kind of research the platform affords. Digital methods thus may be defined as techniques for the ongoing research on the affordances of online media” (Venturini et al. 2018).

Instagram it is not a neutral place but both a medium with its own specificities and a data-driven business model using sophisticated and opaque algorithms; Venturini et al. (2018) rightly warn that: “Using digital methods, we are always at risk of mistaking the characteristics of medium for the signature of the phenomena we wish to observe”. Findings won from digital platforms with digital research methods need to be contextualised with insights from other data sources and, especially

concerning questions of representation and participation, linked to other relevant discourses in the broader media ecology (e.g. news media channels, other online platforms).

It is also important to clearly define the limitations of software tools that automatically collect and analyse data from social media platforms (or other online platforms). As said above, the data is framed by the goals and functions of a given platform. API-based tools are limited to the data they can collect and additional research methods may need to be included. In the present case, the researcher chose human coding within a qualitative-quantitative content analysis to gain insights that were not retrievable from metrics, hashtags, and caption. At the same time, an explorative study like this one can only point at potential tendencies and provide snapshot analyses but remain within strict confinements. However valuable the qualitative insights are, they remain very limited and do not allow to establish statistically grounded correlations and thus generalisations.

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