The mediation of humanitarian crises under authoritarianism

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Declaration: I solemnly declare that I prepared the dissertation I am presenting independently and without undue assistance, that I have completely stated the sources and aids used, and that in each individual case I have identified the passages in the dissertation, including tables, maps and images, that are quoted from other works literally or in spirit as a borrowing; that this dissertation has not been presented to any other faculty or university for examination; that it has not yet been published, apart possibly from partial publication approved by the chairperson of the doctoral committee after consultation with the supervising professor, as well as that I will not undertake any such publication before completing the doctorate. I am aware of the provisions in Sect. 20 and 21 of the doctoral regulations.

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarian communication has emerged as a novel scholarly field in media and communication studies, focusing on the public practices of meaning-making that represent human vulnerability as a cause of public emotion and action in contexts of need and risk. However, it is particularly striking that the field has, until now, barely focused on non-Western and authoritarian contexts characterized by different social realities and political phenomena. This dissertation takes a step toward ameliorating this gap in knowledge by examining the mediation of global humanitarian crises spawned by deep globalization and mediatization in the Chinese authoritarian context. Using a combination of qualitative social-psychological audience study, quantitative and computational framing analysis, and discourse and cultural analysis of social constructionism, the dissertation conducts four empirical studies to investigate whether mediated discourses and techniques can create a cosmopolitan public with a sense of social responsibility toward distant sufferers of whom they know nothing and will never meet. The dissertation has implications for expanding the epistemological and ontological horizons of the field of humanitarian communication that are currently embedded in Western spatial and ideological dimensions.

Contents

Listing of figures

Listing of tables

To mum, dad, mother-in-law, Ivy, and Lukas Shimu.

Acknowledgments

While studying for my B.Eng. in Media and Computer Engineering in China, I enjoyed mathematics and computing, but I was more fascinated by the communication processes in the highly mediated world. I developed a keen interest in how media and communication technologies influence the journalistic and political agenda and the public decision-making process in a world of crises spawned by deep globalization and mediatization. This interest also formed my professional goal, which is to increase understanding of the need for a world in which all individuals can enjoy basic dignity and human rights. Thanks to the swift progress I achieved in my MA degree program in Media and Communication Studies, I was clear that studying and doing research were endeavors I would like to engage in even more. Thus, the tale of my PhD journey began.

As I recollect the journey of my PhD, I am constantly struck by the waves of emotions; moments of pure elation and euphoria, interspersed with moments of sheer frustration and despair (most of the time, honestly). Throughout it all, I am eternally grateful for the unwavering support of my community – comprising my family, mentors, colleagues, and friends – who have been my guiding light through the tumultuous tides of academia.

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1

Introduction

Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, stated in an interview on a French television channel in 1997 that he believed media connects the world into one cohesive unit, making misfortunes, suffering, and catastrophe visible globally. He also alluded to the heroism of spectators that, nourished by media, can rescue the distant sufferer through political or civic engagement. The so-called "CNN Effect" suggests that by bringing continuous, real-time international news coverage of distant suffering – armed conflict arising from extremism, global refugee crises, human rights violations, ter-

rorism, poverty, natural hazards, attacks of racism, and pandemic crisis – into living rooms with an unprecedented intensity and frequency, such coverage can galvanize or stimulate changes in public opinion about the necessity and justification of military action to intervene or alleviate human suffering.

The intersection between media and humanitarianism has therefore provoked lively academic and societal debate, particularly since the mid-1990s, in light of an abundance of humanitarian disasters that affected the lives of millions of people worldwide (Orgad and Seu, 2014). Debate has always focused on the role of aesthetic narratives and technological affordances in saving lives, alleviating suffering, and protecting the dignity and human rights of crisis-affected populations. It is within this context that humanitarian communication has emerged as a novel scholarly field in media and communication studies, focusing on the public practices of meaning-making that represent human vulnerability as a cause of public emotion and action in contexts of need and risk (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki and Vestergaard, 2021; Silverstone, 2007).

In nearly three decades of development, this increasing field has resulted in a wide range of foci, varying from philosophically oriented accounts, anthropological and sociological concerns about the cosmopolitan public, socio-psychological investigations of prosocial behaviour, and modern war, securitization and conflict studies. Although disciplinary foci and theoretical (and methodological) approaches have varied, key concerns can be paraphrased in terms of a paradigmatic *problématique*: whether—and if so, how—can the mediated discourses and techniques of human vulnerability cultivate a cosmopolitan public with a sense of social responsibility toward others of whom they know nothing and will never meet? (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013; Huiberts and Joye, 2019; Kyriakidou, 2017; Moeller, 1999; Scott, 2014, 2015; Seu, 2016; Seu and Orgad, 2017; Silverstone, 2006; Weikmann and Powell, 2019).

Most scholarly accounts in the field are situated and conducted almost exclusively in the default Western context, with an a priori assumption that has privileged the Westerner as the "default spec-

tator" (Ong, 2015: 5). As Cohen (2001) pointed out, it is always audiences in North America or Western Europe that react to knowledge of atrocities in East Timor, Uganda or Guatemala, not the other way around. On the one hand, it is not surprising that the Western-centric characteristics of social sciences are rooted in the epistemological premises and the analytical traditions of Western political, psychological, and sociological theories, and fundamentally draw from frameworks of Western philosophy (Katz et al., 2003; Waisbord, 2014). On the other hand, more importantly, as Joye (2013) argues, the existing Western gaze on the subject is the result of a field developed out of an explicit critique of Western media practices and stereotypes of mediating the other, such as collectivization, homogenization, anonymization, marketization, and dehumanization. Affirmatively, the field not only effectively reveals the dissonance and asymmetry between moral power and geographical regions but also reveals the patterns of economic and political agency that span regions of global influence (Orgad and Seu, 2014). For instance, numerous empirical studies have illuminated the routine use of negative and biased linguistics and visuals of distant suffering in international news media. These practices are often rooted in Northern imperialist, paternalistic, and charity-based attitudes, as well as neo-colonial power relations and cultural proximity (Chouliaraki, 2013; Scott, 2014).

Nevertheless, a plethora of Western-based national case studies may constitute a possible tendency toward "methodological nationalism" (Beck, 2009: 22) in that they ignore the endemic, interpenetrating, and proliferating nature of global crises pawned by globalization and the changing geopolitical situation (Joye, 2013). Given the changing ontology of disasters in a globalizing world, as well as their epistemological constitution through media and communications (Cottle, 2014), contemporary crises and disasters—from climate change to virulent pandemics, from financial meltdowns to world poverty, from economic risk to forced migrations—should be viewed as global phenomena that often necessitate global responses and have become profoundly reliant on transnational cultural mediation. Therefore, the field suggests that there is an imperative to plea

3

for more studies on non-Western cases and contexts, preferably by non-Western academics, or a de-Westernizing of media and communication studies (Joye, 2013; Kyriakidou, 2021; Xu, 2021).

It is essential to acknowledge the necessity for a more critical pedagogy. Adopting a simplistic approach to de-Westernization, which is often posited as an anti-imperialist strategy to promote academic sovereignty, may result in the emergence of new forms of intellectual parochialism. Therefore, it is crucial to approach the concept of de-Westernization with a critical lens. Scholars and analysts should pay attention to the specificity and potential incommensurability of local issues and indigenous theories. In other words, the purpose of de-Westernization is not simply to demonstrate that things are different outside the West. Rather, we aim to help the field rethink arguments and broaden analytical horizons, bringing theoretical and comparative questions to the forefront of the field (Waisbord, 2014). In particular, this approach can force scholars to rethink key conceptual categories in the fields of distant suffering studies and humanitarian communication, such as otherness, cosmopolitan solidarity, proper distance, and the pity of politics (Chouliaraki, 2013; Silverstone, 2006).

Unfortunately, it is particularly striking that the field has, until now, barely focused on non-Western and authoritarian contexts characterized by different social realities and political phenomena (Xu, 2021). How does authoritarian media mediate suffering from afar? What are their dominant media texts, narrative techniques, media cultures, and political discourses? How do audiences in authoritarian contexts connect with the media portrayal of sufferers? By crying sympathetically, protesting angrily or responding ironically? Do they immediately forget the suffering or morally seek assistance for sufferers? Do they have a sense of social responsibility to care for the distant misfortune and catastrophe? Do they persevere and fight against racism and xenophobia for marginalized refugees, keep silent because of stereotypes or strangeness, or engage in schadenfreude from others' misfortune because of national humiliation? Do they support humanitarian causes by digital media, or participate in humanitarian activities actively and donate generously? Are they not pre-

pared to do more, possibly constituting a form of slacktivism? Are they indifferent to compassion and show nationalism and populism?

The dissertation takes a step toward ameliorating this gap in knowledge by examining the mediation of global humanitarian crises spawned by deep globalization and mediatization in authoritarian contexts. Crucially, it reframes current debates about the ethics of mediated suffering beyond Western contexts and aims to provide empirical evidence to nuance and challenge some theoretical assumptions and moral positions currently made in the highly normative literature on distant suffering and humanitarian communication.

1.1 WHY STUDY CHINA?

This dissertation is based on an empirical study of China. The context of China is particularly salient for two reasons, since it not only represents a prime example of a disparity from the Western tradition but also illustrates the unique characteristics of the Chinese context which warrant further investigation.

First, China represents a most quintessential form of government-controlled media parallelism and the highest degree of political instrumentalization (Zhao, 2012). Perhaps more than any other country globally, China's state control over information is deep and far-reaching, and the dominant ideology of authoritarianism has permeated civil society (Cantoni et al., 2017). In particular, compared with media systems in the developed capitalist democracies of Western Europe and North America based on the "most similar systems" (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), the Chinese media system is one of the "most dissimilar systems" of non-Western empirical reality (Zhao, 2012). This difference is fundamentally caused by the struggles between the legacies of Leninism and Maoism, and capitalism and Western imperialism, as well as the understanding of the ongoing struggle between different universalisms and different truth regimes. Despite the diversity and extent of scholarly

5

accounts about the Chinese media, it is possible to highlight that the most popular depiction (or unified understanding) of it in past decades has been that of a loyal agent of the party-state under political censorship (Lee, 2003; Zhao, 2012).

Although the Chinese media system has recently faced challenges from the process of marketization, decentralization, socialization, digitalization, and even impending pressures from bottom-up activism of critical or citizen journalists (Repnikova, 2017), it still has a formidable propaganda and censorship system (Yang, 2014). In other words, the party-state has been adept at utilizing the market and new technologies to enhance and strengthen the propaganda apparatus (Shambaugh, 2007), or monopolizing the technology of disseminating information to seal people's ears and eyes and their thoughts (Yang, 2014).

Second, China's experiences lend itself to a fertile complexity of sociocultural and geopolitical logic – a complex mix of optimistic and pessimistic attitudes/feelings toward distant others. To explain this complexly curious combination, Callahan (2010) argues that China is the pessoptimist nation. More uniquely, both attitudes function to integrate the Chinese party-state's propaganda policy with grassroots popular feelings, intertwining Chinese domestic and international politics (Callahan, 2010). In "positive" narratives, China is playing the role of an enthusiastically global rule-shaper by constructing a globalization concept of a "community of shared future for mankind". In "negative" narratives, exclusionary discourses still flourish within China's public sphere. Examples of such narratives include anti-refugee sentiments caused by a right-wing populist discourse (Zhang, 2019), nationalistic sentiments caused by smoldering memories of imperialism and colonialism (Fong, 2007), and even the xenophobic attachments caused by the contemporary imagination of the Sino–Barbarian Dichotomy (Fairbank, 1968).

Rather than being opposites, such divided discourses are interwoven, separated only by a fine line and can easily trade places (Callahan, 2010). Such a positive-negative dynamic may be (partly) caused by the particularities of Chinese cosmopolitanism, as it represents neither the rich traditions

6

of modern Western cosmopolitanism nor the Confucian heritage-based universalism, and it is always combined/engaged with nationalism (Tyfield and Urry, 2010).

In our globalized world characterized by complex interdependencies and daily differences, the discussion on cosmopolitanism has generated a wide variety of significant views in the social sciences, especially in the fields of moral and socio-political philosophy (Beck, 2002, 2006; Nussbaum, 1997; Ong, 2009). Notwithstanding that all descriptions of cosmopolitanism are nebulous (or, at least, there is no clear consensus on its definition), the centrality of the shared point is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, cultural community or moral norm, are citizens in a single community (Kleingeld and Brown, 2019). Are the voices of the non-Western others being ignored and drowned by the babble of those who have the privilege of power to speak? Delanty (2012) explains that cosmopolitanism as a scholarly term has a Western genealogy, as most current conceptions of cosmopolitanism are derived from Kantian cosmopolitanism, which in turn is derived from Stoic cosmopolitanism (Nussbaum, 1997). Although scholars have made efforts to consider a non-Western or multiculturalist context, or eliminate cultural prejudice, theorizations of cosmopolitanism are still rooted in the West or in the core of the modern world-system (Beck, 2002; Calhoun, 2010). However, Vertovec and Cohen (2002) argue that cosmopolitanism has a much wider and more complex genealogy than that arising from either Kant or ancient Greece.

Extensive scholarly accounts engage with the particularities of Chinese cosmopolitanism. While this literature is as diverse as it is extensive, it is possible to highlight two main threads of civilisational/cultural particularities. First, Delanty (2012) suggests that it is significant to understand the historical strands and trajectories of Chinese cosmopolitanism, as it is not a historically invariable condition, but has shifted several times. Indeed, there are some equivalents of cosmopolitanism in China predating the introduction of this term, which is inextricably tied to an ancient world outlook and traditional foreign relations (Fairbank, 1968). The second particularity is mainly due to China's multiple identities. For example, the country is characterized as a pre-modern universalis-

tic heavenly kingdom of Sinocentrism (Fairbank, 1968; Zhao, 2016), a postcolonial ethnic-nation with collectively colonial and hegemonic memories (Kramer, 2017; Tyfield and Urry, 2010), and an active leader of a new unipolar order to hedge and reshape the Western-dominated international order. Arguably, as China is a multi-ethnic empire with diversified trade connections and a very long pre-modern history of invading other territories, scholars usually define Chinese cosmopolitanism by exploring the dialectical relationship between cosmopolitanism and nationalism rather than positioning them as incompatible opposites (Tyfield and Urry, 2010).

Considering these disparities, further questions emerge. What is the difference between Western media and Chinese authoritarian media, with regard to key aspects such as narrative technology, discourse structure, or ideology? What is the difference between audiences in different contexts in moral sensitivities or in solidity? What are the sociohistorical, cultural, political and philosophical underpinnings for such difference? The aspiration of this dissertation is to provide adequate depth and details to understand these starting-point issues by converting them into specific research questions, and by undertaking and interlocking theoretical approaches and empirical research.

1.2 The aim and layout of the dissertation

This dissertation comprises four distinct studies. Each chapter presents a separate study, and the chapters are self-contained entities. The chapters are empirical articles that include abstracts, theoretical foundations, methods, results, and distinct discussions and conclusions. Each study addresses a specific question, and collectively, they investigate *whether mediated discourses and techniques related to humanitarian crises in the Chinese authoritarian setting foster the development of a cosmopolitan public that feels socially responsible toward distant others of whom they have no prior knowledge and will never meet.*

- **Chapter 2:** What is the role of authoritarian media in mediating distant humanitarian

crises? (*Discourse and cultural analysis of news text using a social constructionism framework; Qualitative social-psychological analysis of focus group data*)

- **Chapter 3:** How do audiences in authoritarian regimes respond to mediated suffering? (*Qualitative social-psychological approach of focus group and interview data*)

- **Chapter 4:** How do Chinese authoritarian media differ from Western media in their framing of distant suffering? (*Quantitative and computational framing analysis of transnational news visual data*)

- **Chapter 5:** How do Chinese media audiences differ from Western audiences in their experiences of the digitalization of humanitarian suffering? (*Qualitative social-psychological approach of focus group and interview data*)

Chapter 2 focuses on a single but illustrative Chinese television news documentary about the "European refugee crisis" and adopts a text-analytical approach using Lilie Chouliaraki's "analytics of mediation." This analysis is combined with a focus group study that exposes respondents to the news documentary. We show that while the Chinese authoritarian television coverage provides audiences with relatively intense mediated experiences of humanized distant suffering, it still carries highly cultural and political orientations. We also reveal that the government-controlled media fails to foster cosmopolitan dispositions in the sense of making audiences more hospitable and reflexive, instead consolidating national discourse and identity politics.

Chapter 3 examines how Chinese audiences legitimize their unresponsiveness to mediated victims of global disasters. In this chapter, we discuss the dominant regimes of justification which inform audience inactivity, the associated argumentation strategies and patterns of reasoning, and their sociocultural and ideological underpinnings. We find that decision-making about the moral justification for inactivity is influenced by state-propaganda media narratives, preferences for ideologies, perceptions of national identity and global responsibility, and geopolitical imaginations.

Chapter 4 compares how the news media in authoritarian regimes and Western democracies visually frame the Afghanistan and Ukraine refugee crises. Analyzing photojournalism data that covers twelve leading professional media outlets in the US, the UK, and China, we first identify frames embedded in the news visuals and then assess the prevalence of these frames. We show that the way humanitarian crises were visualized in the media was significantly influenced by journalism culture across media systems and the geographical origins of suffering. We further suggest that the UK and US media has upheld the underlying post-humanitarianism stance, while Chinese authoritarian media coverage has exemplified the geopoliticization of humanitarian emergencies, with both approaches having dehumanizing implications.

Recent years have witnessed enormous technological changes in the contemporary polymedia milieu and the emergence of algorithmically infused platform societies. These transformations have inevitably brought new questions to the debates, such as the platformization of suffering with its concomitant datafication and digital colonialism of humanitarianism (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard, 2021). To this end, **Chapter 5** explores whether existing immersive virtual reality (VR) artifacts construct a technocratic solutionism which becomes constitutive of humanitarian crises themselves. Drawing upon empirical material from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with VR audiences in China, Germany, and the UK, we show that VR may easily construct a depoliticized hyperreality of intense spectacularity and trap audiences within an improper distance, thereby reworking the colonial legacies of humanitarianism while also obfuscating complex asymmetries of power and structural political exclusion.

In conclusion, this dissertation has implications for expanding the epistemological and ontological horizons of the field of humanitarian communication by moving beyond the Western spatial and ideological dimensions that currently dominate the field, particularly in a world of crises spawned by globalization and mediatization. I am convinced that this newly expanded horizon will provide an ideal setting of great interest to academics, policymakers, teachers, students, journalists, and practi-

tioners, as well as general readers, to understand the complexities of humanitarian communication and distant suffering beyond Western contexts.

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2

The politics of pity and authoritarian media

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The media are among the most powerful of societal sense-makers, as they have transcended the limitations of time and space, propelling the projection of distant stories to every corner of the world (Robertson, 2010). As a consequence, significant recent scholarship has shown a growing interest in studying normative questions related to the care and obligations for geographically, socially and

culturally distant sufferers who only appear to us within the media (see, inter alia, Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013; Höijer, 2004; Huiberts and Joye, 2019; Joye, 2015; Kyriakidou, 2017; Orgad and Seu, 2014; Scott, 2014; Silverstone, 2006; Weikmann and Powell, 2019). These scholarly works focus on the mediation of human vulnerability as a cause for action in contexts of need and risk and have appeared under the banner of media and morality, which has been identified as representing a "dramatic moral-ethical turn" in media studies (Ong, 2009: 449). Such a moral turn urges scholars to predominantly explore a problématique of whether the media can cultivate cosmopolitans with a sense of social responsibility toward others of whom they know nothing and will never meet (Beck, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2006).

Undeniably, a rich and coherent cluster of research has effectively revealed the dissonance and asymmetry between moral power and geographical regions and exposed the patterns of economic and political agency that continuously produce global inequality, injustice, and poverty (Orgad and Seu, 2014). However, a plethora of studies have tended to concentrate on Western democracies (with a notable exception in Ong, 2015), with an a priori assumption that human vulnerability and suffering occur in the Global South and are outside the direct experience of the majority of the public in the Global North (Ong, 2015; Schieferdecker, 2021). This assumption overlooks the deterritorialized nature of today's global interdependency crises and risks, which are pawned by globalization and the changing geopolitical situation in line with economic and political transformations (Joye, 2013). While there have been pleas for more "de-Westernizing" studies (Joye, 2013; Kyriakidou, 2021), we know little about non-Western contexts—especially authoritarian contexts—that are characterized by different social realities, political phenomena, and media ecologies.

This article is a much-needed contribution to the de-Westernization of the field as it empirically explores the role of government-controlled media in mediating distant suffering. China is an especially vital context for providing a representative case since it is a typically non-Western authoritarian nation. China is also the most rapidly growing global power, with a rapidly industrializing economy,

a distinct sociocultural and geopolitical context, and a most quintessential form of government-controlled media parallelism (Repnikova, 2017; Zhao, 2012). This study concentrates on a single but illustrative Chinese television news documentary about the "European refugee crisis" since 2015. Textual analysis of the documentary is carried out using Lilie Chouliaraki's (2006) analytics of mediation, which is the most elaborate framework available for analyzing distant suffering on television. This analytical approach is combined with a bottom-up interpretative focus group study that exposes 81 respondents to the news documentary. Both sets of findings suggest that while the Chinese authoritarian television coverage provides audiences with relatively intense mediated experiences of humanized distant suffering, it still carries highly cultural and political orientations. The government-controlled media therefore fails to foster cosmopolitan dispositions, in the sense of making audiences more hospitable and reflexive, and instead consolidates the national discourse and identity politics. In presenting these empirical findings, the article aims to compel scholarship to revisit the contemporary sociological debates in the Western-centric and (often) highly normative field of studies on distant suffering.

2.2 The mediation of distant suffering

Sonia Livingstone (2009: 7) theorizes that mediation is the way "the media mediate, entering into and shaping the mundane but ubiquitous relations among individuals and between individuals and society". It particularly underscores media's transformational capacities toward social processes (Couldry, 2008), thereby emphasizing the nature of the "mediapolis" (Silverstone, 2006: 39) as a mediated public space of appearance (Arendt, 1958/1998) in contemporary societies, where the materiality of the world is constructed through electronically communicated public speech and action. In this regard, Roger Silverstone (2005) requires media scholars to address the dialectical processes of communication as both "institutionally and technologically driven and embedded" (189). Sil-

verstone is here "enriching the cycle of communication" (Siapera, 2010: 73) by synthesizing technologically the medium evolution, forces of capitalism and modernity, processes of production and representation, and psychosocially and socio-culturally contextualized media reception.

Within the media ethics literature more particularly, the mediation theory is generally preferred because it can capture the complex ways the media are implicated in the relationship between audiences and distant others, and can offer a new and exciting analytical space to think through the social and moral consequences of the media (Cottle, 2009). Using discourse analysis, visual analysis, content analysis, thematic analysis, and general impressionistic analysis, a rich and diverse body of work, under the direction of "textual ethics" (Ong, 2015: 48), has focused on unearthing the pedagogical potential of the texts of mediation for evoking and distributing the "politics of pity" (Boltanski, 1999: 7). That is to say, scholarship has focused on the ways in which various media and their semiotic resources morally produce meaning about distant human misfortune, thus arousing the emotion of the spectators and inviting their impartial deliberation on how to act upon the misfortune (Chouliaraki, 2006; Moeller, 1999; Orgad, 2012; Robertson, 2010; Silverstone, 2006).

These text-focused studies helpfully provide signposts for analyzing precisely how media texts chart patterns, trends, and conventions, to help us recognize certain regimes of Foucauldian meanings and to diagram representational behaviors. These elements constitute recommendations for audiences to interact with the distant suffering, and influence whether they commit to help alleviate the suffering (Orgad and Seu, 2014). The most striking example is arguably Moeller's (1999) compassion fatigue hypothesis. Moeller argues that the audience's indifference and apathy result from the highly formulaic, repetitive, decontextualized, and sensationalized news media coverage of wars, famines, and humanitarian crises. Likewise, Chouliaraki (2013) argues that the politicization, marketization and technicalization of humanitarianism breeds a what's-in-it-for-me ethics of post-humanitarianism among the public. The beliefs of such a narcissistic public relatively lessens the consideration of the political factors and socio-economic mechanisms underpinning the suffer-

18

ing, sustaining an apolitical and individualistic conception of humanitarianism. This has inevitably failed to convert into a more radical and egalitarian action to implement political practices of global solidarity.

However, if the text is considered as a perlocutionary act rather than an illocutionary act, the potential of text-analytical approaches to account for how texts actually shape and have an impact on audiences' knowledge and action is limited. Analyzing A [media text] to infer the impact of A on B [audiences], instead of analyzing B directly, will reinforce a mechanistic and over-simplistic view of mediated relationships (Ong, 2009). As Cottle (2009) argues, "different 'regimes of pity' may or may not register and resonate with actual audiences ... when audiences do respond to calls for compassion embedded into news packages and visuals of human suffering they may be doing so in differentiated and quite distinct ways" (137). More importantly, it failed to effectively resolve a dialogical process of mediation as required by Silverstone (2006), in which the mediated experiences of suffering should be regulated by both the media text and audience reception. To this end, scholars argue that it is necessary to empirically verify the extent to which the normative frameworks and assumptions contained in textual analysis remain relevant when applied to the study of people's mediated everyday lives (Joye, 2013). The recent upsurge in reception-focused studies has been proverbially called for, ranging from the qualitative interpretative approach of social constructionism (Ong, 2015; Kyriakidou, 2017; Scott, 2014) to the quantitative deductive-nomological approach of realist positivism (Huiberts and Joye, 2019; Weikmann and Powell, 2019). Existing audience studies, though limited in number and scope, along with textual studies, have so far driven a greater degree of methodological holism in mediated suffering studies.

More importantly, these empirical audience studies help us to unwrap the ways audiences engage with distant suffering in their diversity and particularity. Kyriakidou (2017, 2020), Ong (2015), and Schieferdecker's (2021) scholarly accounts argue that ignoring the variety and nuance in audience reactions across different national sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts is a potential blind spot

19

in the field. They provide a reminder that audience reception of distant suffering can be approached as a problem of civic culture as much as a problem of mediation, thus providing an opportunity to challenge Western assumptions based on a slice of context-specific cases. For instance, by anthropologically investigating the "lay moralities" of national audiences in the class-divided Philippines, Ong (2015) demonstrates that power also traverses viewing relationships within the Global Southern sphere, between the suffering working class and the wealthy middle classes. This ethnographic study in a non-Western context concludes that the proximal and internal sufferers remain others beyond reach and forces scholarship to reevaluate key sociological categories, such as otherness and proper distance.

2.3 The Chinese media system as an agent of cosmopolitan socialization?

Media institutions are critical intermediaries in the mediation of suffering and the global production and distribution of images and stories of disasters and atrocities (Orgad and Seu, 2014). Media systems that influence the character of various news media institutions (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) are undoubtedly the key agents of "cosmopolitan socialization" (Lindell, 2015: 190). Current empirical studies on distant suffering mainly focus on Western media systems of the developed capitalist democracies, such as the liberal North Atlantic system (the UK and the US), the polarized-pluralist Mediterranean system (Greece), and the democratic-corporatist system (Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, and Finland). Compared with these "most similar systems" (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 6) in Western Europe and North America, the Chinese media system is one of the "most dissimilar systems" reflecting the non-Western empirical reality (Zhao, 2012: 8). This difference is fundamentally caused by the struggles between the legacies of Leninism, Maoism, and capitalism and Western imperialism, and the understanding of the ongoing struggle between different universalisms and different truth regimes (Zhao, 2012).

While scholarly accounts about the Chinese media are as diverse as the media is extensive, it is possible to highlight that the most popular depiction (or unified understanding) of it in past decades has been that of an absolutely loyal agent or mouthpiece of the party state under political censorship (Lee, 2003; Repnikova, 2017; Zhao, 2012). The Chinese mass media, which has long served as the Communist Party's mouthpiece, has the highest degree of political instrumentalization, displaying all the features of a quintessential government-controlled media parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Although this authoritarian media system has faced challenges from commercialization, capitalization, and market-driven expansion, the impact of new information and communication technologies, and the globalization of ideas, it still formidably propagates the official ideology and political programs to the Chinese public sphere.

In particular, although the globalist discourse of "a community of shared future for mankind" has permeated Chinese sociopolitical discourse, the Chinese mass media has always been utilized by authoritarian regimes to bolster their domestic legitimacy and the superiority of the Chinese political system by invoking nationalist narratives and aspirations (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019). For example, the negative framing of racial discrimination, rampant violence and other violations of human rights in Western countries by the Chinese media has been levied primarily to justify China's controversial human rights situation (Zhou *et al*., 2012). Similarly, much of the criticism of the double standards perceived in Western free speech ideologies by the Chinese media has been mobilized primarily to neutralize China's poor domestic record concerning media freedom. Such nationalist propaganda may affect cultural-national self-identities and the global imaginaries of otherness among the Chinese public, especially with regards to "the West", and is based on binary opposites of us versus them—it can also be exclusive, antagonistic, and xenophobic (Song *et al*., 2019).

Theoretically, such an authoritarian media system seems to contradict Silverstone's (2006) idea of a mediapolis that harbors a media culture fostering sensibilities of openness and cosmopolitanism among its public. However, we cannot speculate narrowly that government-controlled media in-

evitably fail to act as the key agents of cosmopolitan socialization to promote transnational solidarity or the egalitarian action of political practices of global solidarity in Chinese public life. Instead, through an analytical lens of studies of distant suffering, the task of this article is to empirically evaluate whether the government-controlled media can cultivate a sense of cosmopolitan responsibility toward distant suffering among the Chinese public.

Keeping the aforementioned theoretical considerations in mind, we posed two research questions to structure the data collection and analysis:

> *RQ1. How do government-controlled media regulate audiences' mediated experiences of distant suffering?*

> *RQ2. To what extent do audiences adopt the positions in relation to distant suffering which an application of the textual analysis suggests that government-controlled media invite them to adopt?*

2.4 STUDY DESIGN

2.4.1 TEXT-ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The selected case study involves what has been widely described as the "European refugee crisis" in which, since 2015, billions of people in the Global South have been forced to flee their homes due to war, oppression, or disastrous economic circumstances, while European societies have been mired in a heightened environment of terrorist threats. The refugee crisis highlights the main features of what Cottle (2011) defines as a global interdependency crisis—"endemic, constantly emergent or even enduring critical events and threats that emanate from within today's global (dis)order and that range across and interpenetrate within different realms of global interdependency" (79). However, in China, vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers are usually perceived as distant sufferers and are

mediated, since for most Chinese the connection with them still primarily exists as the consumption of their images from various media accounts (Jiang *et al*., 2021). More importantly, the diversity of sufferers (Southern refugees and Western victims) allows for an investigation of the multivalences of power relations between the Chinese public and others—as outlined above—in particular geopolitical contexts.

This article focuses on television texts. On the one hand, television is still expected to be most people's primary audio-visual medium for the near future (Couldry, 2012). In other words, television is a major source of information about the world beyond direct observation and is potentially a significant factor in how individuals cope with the observable world in their everyday lives. On the other hand, either in traditional or digital streaming forms, television remains one of the most potent forms of government-controlled media available to authoritarian regimes, despite the increasing complexity of media ecosystems and fragmentation of audiences (Chadwick, 2017). For instance, although Chinese Central Television (CCTV), China's predominant public broadcaster operated by the National Radio and Television Administration, has "grown from a primitive channel of state-funded polemic drudgery to an aspiring player in China's newly commercialized media industries" (Zhu, 2014: 18), it remains the most quintessential form of government-controlled media parallelism (Zhao, 2012).

Rather than investigate the routine television news in the channel's 24/7 footage flow, the study mainly focuses on magazine-type news documentaries broadcast on the CCTV program World Weekly. The first reason for this is that the World Weekly can be deemed a prototypical example of the authoritative commentary representing the political viewpoint of the authoritarian government on international issues and societies. It can drive an authoritarian public consciousness of international news and events (Zhu, 2014). The second reason is that the World Weekly contains a comparable level of both explanation and emotional force that is normally lacking in regular news items. As Scott (2014) argues, we can learn more about how television influences audiences' medi-

ated experiences of distant suffering if we expand our focus beyond the peak moments of television news coverage during disasters (Robertson, 2010).

To learn what dispositions to feel, think and act toward sufferers emanate from the sampled television program, the analytical approach adopted in this study closely follows Chouliaraki's (2006) analytics of mediation. This elaborate analytical framework enables the mediation process to be conceptualized, while allowing the analyst to explore how media text, semiotic-discursive structure, and aesthetic practice reproduce hierarchies of place and human life and affect audiences' ability to engage with distant suffering. Chouliaraki (2006) indicates that existing narratives about the cosmopolitan potential of media are polarized between two contrasting states: optimism and pessimism. The dual process of mediation—"passing through the medium" and "overcoming distance" (Tomlinson, 1999: 154)—may lead to a "utopianism" faith that media could restore the democratization of responsibility and global connectivity, or it may lead to a skepticism faith that media cannot generate genuine concern for distant sufferers. The crux of the analytics of mediation is to examine how three paradoxes of mediation that exist between these two contrasting narratives are seemingly resolved within individual media texts.

The first paradox of mediation focuses on technology, which refers to the technology simultaneously establishing and destroying global connectivity, leading to a sense of immediacy or indifference. The second paradox focuses on distance, which refers to how mediation situates spectators too far from sufferers, leading to depersonalization and indifference, and at the same time, it brings spectators close to the sufferers, leading to intimacy and connection. The third paradox focuses on the in/action, which refers to how mediation situates spectators both as passive onlookers to the scene of suffering and as active, involved actors. To investigate these three paradoxes, Chouliaraki (2006) incorporated understandings of mediation as a process involving both immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin, 2000); these ideas maintain a sense of mediation as passing through the medium and overcoming distance while also exploring each of these three dimensions of mediation.

24

To analyze mediation in terms of immediacy and hypermediacy, Chouliaraki (2006) integrates two levels of analysis by capitalizing on the poststructuralist views of meaning and power (see Table 2.1). The first level is multimodal discourse analysis which helps us analyze how meaning-making about distant suffering occurs on the media screen as a hypermediated accomplishment. The second level is critical discourse analysis (CDA), or the critical study of media technologies as being embedded in existing power relationships of viewing, which helps us analyze how the media text brings forth emotions and wishes for engagement with the distant suffering as an immediate reality for the audience (Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2008). The combination of the two analytical levels provides an integrated account of how the television text seemingly positions audiences vis-à-vis distant suffering, and considers "the embeddedness of media texts both in technological artefacts and in social relationships" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 153).

Even though this approach was developed specifically for analyzing European television news, Chouliaraki (2006) does not assert that it is peculiar to the Western genealogy or that it is not universally applicable. However, clearly, mediation processes do not exist in a media and societal vacuum, but rather as part of a broader and enveloping sociocultural and geopolitical context already plied by China's nativist and authoritarian ideologies. Therefore, analysts should pay attention to the specificity of indigenous intellectual and cultural traditions when adopting the analytics of mediation in specific contexts.

2.4.2 Audience reception study

To verify the arguments developed within the above textual analysis, 90-minute focus groups were conducted on 18 separate occasions with 81 respondents in total (N=81). These focus groups were conducted in China between June and July 2021, as part of a larger study of authoritarian audiences of mediated suffering. All respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. A few initial contacts (seeds) were enlisted using social networks, on the basis of their fitting the research criteria.

Paradox to be resolved	Level of analysis	Analytical toolkit
Paradox of technology	Multimodal analysis	Mode of presentation (perceptual, categorical or ideological realism) Verbal-visual relations (indexical, iconic or symbolic) Aesthetic quality (pamphleteering, philanthropy or sublimation)
Paradox of distance	Critical discourse analysis	The complexity of space-time (spatiotemporal concreteness, specificity, multiplicity and mobility) Historicality/causality
Paradox of in/action	Critical discourse analysis	The degree of humanization of sufferers (motion, gaze, voice, and condition) The orchestration of the benefactor and persecutor figures

Table 2.1: The analytical toolkits of the analytics of mediation

Sampling usually continues until data saturation. The respondents varied in terms of gender (53.1% female, 46.9% male), educational level (60.5% bachelor's degree or higher, 39.5% some high school education), and age (M = 33.9, SD = 11.2), and were a geographically diverse group from urban and rural areas of China.

The group conversations were structured around relatively similar age groups with an even gender mix to encourage positive group dynamics and deliberately avoided mixing both the youngest and oldest media users, as these have demonstrably different media habits (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018) and cosmopolitan dispositions (Scott, 2015). In terms of the sociodemographic variables related to locales and educational level, we maintained homogeneity within each individual group but aimed for diversity across the different focus groups. This strategy can provide an open environment in which differences of opinions can be celebrated and discussed freely, and respondents' complex behaviors and motivations can be sighted thoroughly, particularly when discussing the

morally sensitive topics of distant suffering (Kyriakidou, 2021).

During the first step, respondents were shown the sampled television program. Following this viewing, they were asked about the program and their ideas regarding the perceived message, and their thoughts, emotions, sense of personal responsibility and ability to help (Seu and Orgad, 2017). All discussions were anonymous. Data were originally recorded in Chinese Mandarin, and texts have been translated by us and checked by a native speaker to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

Our analysis largely involved clustering relevant audience data into the three paradoxes of mediation using the data analysis software NVivo. In most instances, based on the authenticity principle, the quotations were selected because they provide the most illustrative, noteworthy, and representative representation of audiences' discussion on a particular subject, not because they provided the most extreme examples.

2.5 RESULTS

2.5.1 Resolving the paradox of technology: Considering multimodality

The World Weekly episode was broadcast on 6 September 2020. It is a half-hour program, mainly composed of a large number of scenes of refugees in which they express their thoughts and feelings to the camera. This is interspersed with commentary on civic and political events during the refugee crisis. Rather than presenting a purely factual and objective account of reality, the program's mode of presentation purports to document various anecdotes describing the situation of civilians who were driven out of their homes by war and poverty and their living conditions in Europe. It is thus reasonable to suggest that the "mode of presentation" is informing "categorical realism" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 75) because the strongest appeal is to a reality evoked by emotionality or stronger feelings rather than facts or authenticity.

The "narration proper" is the first thread for confirming the dominance of categorical realism

(Chouliaraki, 2006: 79): it frames the visual representation of suffering with dramatic urgency and sensationalism, thereby bringing about emotionality. For example, in this program, there is a main video transition consisting of a set of frequently used iconographies of the border spectacle, in which vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers have taken the risk to cross the newly installed barbed-wire border fence and the Mediterranean Sea. These iconographies service the incitement of empathy or the "duty to empathy" (Chouliaraki and Stolić, 2019)—especially the close-ups of starving children, or the images of women on the run and seeking shelter (Joye, 2015)—and may seek to strike a chord with the audience and generate empathy (Orgad, 2012).

In addition, Chouliaraki (2006) argues that categorical realism relies on the iconic meaning of resemblance between images and words rather than some direct physical connection. Such iconicity is the use of images as a signifier of generic conditions, which weaves a dense regime of meanings around the emergency and tension of the refugee crisis. In this regime, the visuals of refugees' bare lives and the bombed city portray the reality of the refugee crisis in a manner so powerful that linguistics and language are not needed to describe it. This is what Chouliaraki (2006) describes as the "transfer effects" (134); that is, speech here has a transfer effect on the visual. Verbal references to "tragedy," "death," and "corpse" capitalize on the "shock effect" of the images, and they sustain and intensify the emotional appeal of the refugees' everyday fear, degrading treatment, and abandonment by authorities and the "negativity," "inferiority," and "vulnerability" of the Global South. For example, the Eritrean refugee Barroll desperately talked to the camera about the story of his wife's sudden death before she could be reunited with him: "I don't have enough courage to face my life." These verbal references capitalize on the images of his gaze and of him kissing the family photo; later on, more to the point, the shots of his desperate eyes or the sound of his sighing sustains and intensifies the emotional appeal of the suffering by forced displacement and the destruction of home.

However, there is also strong evidence of "ideological realism" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 75), or a reality of our deep-seated certainties and beliefs about the way the world is or should be. Ideological

realism is produced through an appeal to a sense of justice, which in this case takes the form of explicit appeals by an ethical judgment directed against the "humanitarian securitization at Europe's borders" (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2017: 159) and the inherent inequality of social resources distribution among the host country's population and the refugees. For example, there are instances in the voiceover suggesting that the never-ending refugee crisis has revealed "Europe's structural flaws and political antagonisms," which ultimately leads to "Brexit," "intra-European antagonisms," "the surge in support for right-wing populist governments in Western Europe" and the rise in "Italy's governing populist Five Star Movement." This commentary is followed by photography where the Defend Europe protesters, with prominently displayed banners, have told people in a variety of languages, "No Way—You Will Not Make Europe Home." Such judgment becomes more apparent in the closing remarks of the anchorman at the end of the program: "nothing has really changed for the better since 2015, politicians have only boasted about their border policies instead of thinking about the global problems that cause people to flee."

Albeit ephemeral, the ethical judgment certainly carries highly political orientations, which have been partly entangled in Chinese politics in a discourse and mentality belonging to the long-sustained nationalistic ideological traditions of negatively framing the West. As Jiang *et al*. (2021) found, Chinese media often negatively portrayed the anti-refugee continuum of public attitude politics in Europe. This is evident in the anchorman's exaggerated or highly colored and emotive presentation: "Wealthy Western countries are hiding behind their closed doors, ignoring victims of war and violence being displaced." Such narratives may provide a symbolic means to recall and activate symbols of national and politico-historical memory to fuel the emotional discontent and "anger" with the Western hegemony in the international system among the Chinese public. The language of anti-imperialism is often a crucial element in the Chinese imagination regarding the global refugee crisis and the securitization of terrorism, thereby framing a claim that Western hegemonic diplomacy in the Middle East and Africa is the root cause of the refugee crisis (Guan and Liu,

29

2019; Zhang, 2019).

As a result, two dimensions of the aesthetic quality are juxtaposed. On the one hand, as the result of the main storyline conveying the emotional reality of refugees' misfortunes, it is suggested that the main reactions audiences are invited to adopt are ones associated with philanthropy or moral emotions of tender-heartedness toward the vulnerable refugees. On the other hand, this emotional aesthetic quality is pamphleteering along with the geopolitical ideology against imperialism. In brief, audiences are invited to adopt ideas associated with the blame-filled feelings toward Europe and its failure to respond to the refugee and migration crisis, and even political anger toward the Western hegemony.

2.5.2 RESOLVING THE PARADOX OF DISTANCE: CONSIDERING SPACE-TIME

The space-time of the World Weekly program is concretized, multiple, and specified, while mobility is absent. First, space-time is concrete in that the visualization of events introduces audiences to the concrete spaces of suffering or the life-world where refugees live and act. Second, the space-time is rendered multiple in that the linguistic referents and visual montages enable audiences to experience multiple spaces consisting of many contexts of suffering events and philanthropic actions. There are displaced refugees in a tableau vivant of suffering, who are completely grief-stricken in their present catastrophic conditions, and coverage of the German civil search and rescue vessel Sea-Eye, which operates in the Mediterranean Sea in an effort to alleviate the suffering. These sequences portray the refugee crisis as a "multifaceted and dynamic reality" and cover a vast and complex array of space, thereby giving a sense of "depth" to the scene of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2006: 122). As a consequence of this intensely chronotopic multiplicity, the witnessing of suffering can now take place from one single position or shift to the omnipresence of everywhereness.

Thirdly, the space-time is specific in that the linguistic referents progress toward increasingly precise names and details of geographical locations, from a country ("Germany," "Syria") to a city

("Damascus") to some high-profile specific places ("Turkish beach" and "Moria Camp"). Visual specificity involves individualized images of the refugees on which the plot of the news narrative is focalized. The camera zooming in on the refugees' faces and gazes produces a sense of "liveness immediacy and co-presence" (Frosh, 2011: 52), thereby compelling the audiences to stay "on the spot" (Orgad, 2012: 1). However, we cannot seem to locate any evidence of space-time mobility or links between the life-worlds of audiences and distant others. Mobility is at the core of the complexity because it is often considered a key constituent of a cosmopolitan disposition, which is necessary for forming a global civil society. As Szerszynski and Urry (2006) argue, a sense of mobility can "create an awareness of interdependence, encouraging the development of a notion of 'pan-humanity'" (117–118).

The main temporality of the program is the past— "five years ago" or "since 2015" when billions of people in the Global South were being forced to flee their homes due to oppression or disastrous economic circumstances. Theoretically, references to the past certainly contextualize the global refugee crisis in the logic of explanation, thereby reinforcing the historicity of events. However, a broader explanation of the geopolitical turmoil in the Global South and the asymmetry of power between North and South are selectively erased from the narrative in this program. Such selective information disclosure and decontextualized portrayal may deflect attention away from the complex nature of proliferating and interpenetrating global crises and ultimately leave audiences with a severely limited understanding or cognitive bias of the causes of the refugee crisis that favors a specific party-state standing. The program, in this sense, may fail to present the refugee crisis within a "logic of causality" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 99) or as being a product of long-term consequences and a broader historical and sociocultural circumstance. In summary, although more complicated space-time can lessen the "othering", which invites audiences to observe distant refugees as proximate, the audience is still positioned outside the scene of action.

2.5.3 Resolving the paradox of in/action: Considering the agency

Although numerical aggregation and depersonalizing numbers still exist in this program, the dominance of the agency of sufferers is represented in humanized and individualized formations. The process of identity construction endows refugees with the power to do something about their suffering condition. At the same time, the physical and psychological pain of individual sufferers is a strong point of identification for the audiences, as the idea behind the politics of pity suggests, which may instigate empathetic connections between the audiences and others. For example, Ayub, a thirteen-year-old Syrian boy, attends worship in the mosque (motion), and is frequently making eye contact with the audience (gaze), while being observed in the street entirely wiped out by conflicts (condition), and analyzing the risks of their predicament to the camera (voice). The refugee boy is no longer the figure of the voiceless refugee in the humanitarian imaginary whose voice is banished to the margins of media and discursive networks (Chouliaraki and Stolić, 2017; Stavinoha, 2019). Instead, the boy's voice is heard discussing politics and their predicament, and speech gives him the potential to articulate conceptions of fairness and injustice, which "allows for the space of the political to emerge" (Nyers, 2008: 163). The consequences of the acts of citizenship given by voice may make refugees become visible and audible political subjects (Stavinoha, 2019).

However, refugees are also occasionally portrayed as half-naked, exposing emaciated rib cages, arms, and legs, such as in the images of a half-naked refugee who appears exhausted while swimming in the Mediterranean and a dirty hand holding relief food in the Moria refugee camp. Captured on camera, as the refugees sit passively in a row, the parts of their vulnerable bodies construct a form of dismantling, to fragmentation. They do not reflect real human bodies but curiosities of the flesh that mobilize "a pornographic spectatorial imagination between disgust and desire" (Chouliaraki, 2010: 110). Such fragmentation is a technique of representation that, in reducing humans to their parts, turns them into objects of fetishism (Hall, 1997). In so doing, such "shock aesthetics" have

established a social relationship anchored on the hierarchy of human life and premised on the maximal distance between audience and sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2010: 110). This is the paradoxicality of the agency of refugees, represented in the humanization and individualization of human figures and the fetishization of biological machines: simultaneously, it appeals to a moral connection with the audiences and distances them from the unfamiliar refugees.

The community of the West or, more specifically, the German host society plays a twofold role—they act as both benefactors and persecutors. On the one hand, the benefactors are the boat crews of German non-profit and civil search and rescue organizations with strong professional medical and military skills, and the implementers of the refugee integration policy, such as German language trainers. However, the humanitarian campaigns depicted in the benefactors' story is highly characteristic of "paternalistic, charity-based and frequently neo-colonial development practices and projects" (Cameron and Haanstra, 2008: 1478), in which the poor depend on the rich, and the Global South depends on the West.

On the other hand, it was also intimated to the audiences that the Western countries and societies act as persecutors. Right-wing populist parties, and those who express outright xenophobic and racist indignations across Europe, are portrayed as "hegemonic" persecutors who construct refugees as a "problem" or an economic burden, or as an "evil-doing threat" to the welfare state (Chouliaraki and Stolić, 2017; Vollmer and Karakayali, 2017). As the ideological idea of anti-imperialism and anti-hegemony has persisted and continued to expand in Chinese political culture since the end of the Cold War (Guan and Liu, 2020), the antithetic relationship between the Chinese public and Western imperialism may be intensified by this portrayal of imperialist persecutors. In this way, the symbolic figure of the Western benefactor has the potential to become the secondary actor in the humanitarian theatre. Taken together, these instances of blurring of the categories of benefactor and persecutor with fixed attributes unsettle the politics of pity. Consequently, the twofold orchestration in the spectacle of suffering affects the audience's identification of the benefactors and

33

persecutors, and it may also mobilize potential hostility against the West by recalling and activating symbols of national and cultural tradition.

2.5.4 The audience of mediated suffering

A surprising amount of evidence emerged from discussions to suggest that the vast majority of study respondents did indeed regularly adopt the morally acceptable, philanthropic responses that have been identified in the textual analysis. Evidence of tender-hearted actions and emotions among respondents, especially the female respondents, could be found in their affective language to describe the refugees and asylum seekers, as well as their emotional reactions to the benefactor's humanitarian action. For example, the references to "tears" and the "upsetting" scenes in the quotations below were symptomatic of the frequently emotional responses to the visualities and narratives depicting distressed refugee women with their starving and malnourished children and the scenes of civil search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

> It actually brought tears to my eyes ... It was really sorrowful because of the unknown future waiting for these displaced refugees ... My heart was broken when I saw a mother who had held her child cross the iron curtain (FG2, 33, female).

> The scenes of rescue activities in the Mediterranean are too unforgettable for me. Those refugees crowded into a small rescue boat, and even going to the toilet became the biggest problem ... It was very upsetting (FG7, 25, female).

By contrast, there was little evidence of any explicit accusations or fits of anger toward persecutors' actions and behaviors, such as European "rejection of immigrants" and the securitization at Europe's borders identified in the textual analysis. Instead, respondents' discourses associated with pamphleteering often took the form of either "mild disapproval or begrudging acceptance" (Scott,

2014: 11) of their actions. For instance, in the first quotation below, the securitization at Europe's borders was understood as just something that sovereign nation states do as part of their civic dispositions of proactive protection. In the second quotation, the European "rejection of immigrants" and xenophobia represents just a normal grassroots public opinion that embodies "human nature," and not something to get particularly angry about.

> I have to say that it is inhumane to close borders and even suppress refugees by force. But I can also understand that the whole of Europe is mired in the alarming danger of terrorism ... their border policies are just to protect their citizens (FG6, 45, male).

> From the perspective of human nature, this xenophobia fully demonstrated the selfishness of human nature ... this is human nature ... it's normal (FG12, 32, male).

There is no clear trace of antagonism toward anti-Western hegemonies in the dataset, except on the few occasions where respondents regard the misfortune of the refugees in the Global South as seen as a consequence of political games and the capitalist economy of plunder between superpowers. Interestingly, on a number of occasions, respondents instead accept and (re)interpret a globally circulated discourse of Western populist nationalism about the securitization of terrorism (Guan and Liu, 2019), as reflected in the distancing of refugees as a "way of shifting focus away from the humanitarian tragedies" (Höijer, 2004: 524). For example, when respondents spoke about emaciated refugees in refugee camps who need urgent medical care, with emphasis on grassroots and personal storytelling, references to the problem being "too far away" appeared in all group discussions and was the most agreed upon perspective. Although a significant degree of spatiotemporal complexity was established in the news text, respondents did not experience a greater proximity or immediacy to distant others.

> What happened to those poor Syrians or Afghans was too far from my everyday life.

I couldn't feel it when I saw refugees crowded into an ill-equipped relief station …

being born in China is the most supreme stroke of luck (FG14, 26, female).

This representative quotation also alludes to the fact that the sense of mobility that connects the life-worlds of audiences and distant others was absent in respondents' public talk, just as was suggested in the textual analysis. Instead, the interaction between audiences and sufferers is manifested in dichotomous comparison rather than cosmopolitan connectivity, which is ultimately limited in a clear polarized opposition between the Chinese homogenous ethnic community and its ethno-cultural other, embodied typically by the figure of Global Southern refugees. Enormously diverse racial, ethnic and religious refugee groups were homogenized as a collective whole, and then figured as lazy, welfare-dependent, and prone to crime. Striking examples of this impression included the following quotations: "they are terrorists, and as long as they come in, terrorist attacks and explosions will occur" (FG17); "they are inherently unreliable, as they are a race prone to breaking the law" (FG17); "they are very ill-bred" (FG18). These "threatening" others a priori refer to young male migrants with dark skin whose presence and dispositions pose an alleged threat to women and societies, especially when respondents repeatedly mentioned the incidents of alleged sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany, and smoldering memories of domestic terrorist attacks by extremist Muslims.

The demonization and vilification of Muslim masculinity are ultimately symptomatic of a process of dehumanization, failing to situate those sufferers within their historical context. Such inherently exclusive popular assertions can be interpreted as part of Chinese cultural stereotypes and prejudices associated with nationalist populism and exclusionary nativism. They represent a contemporary mutation of the globally imagined racial hierarchies in Sinocentric cosmopolitanism or Sino-civilisational supremacism (Rofel, 2012; Zhang, 2019), akin to broader ideas of Western superiority and the strong culture of Western-Orientalism, as well as prejudices based on narrow definitions of national culture (Kyriakidou, 2020). These interpretations and articulations suggest

36

that audiences in authoritarian contexts are also using national sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts with broader political and public discourses that frame audiences' understanding of the social world to make sense of distant suffering (Kyriakidou, 2017, 2021; Schieferdecker, 2021), rather than relying solely on the moment of mediation.

2.6   CONCLUSION

This article assesses whether Chinese government-controlled media can cultivate cosmopolitan dispositions in the public sphere through an empirical study of the mediation of the distant refugee crisis and audience reception in authoritarian China. Firstly, in applying the "analytics of mediation" to an episode of the World Weekly, we have provided evidence to suggest that this particular Chinese television program offers audiences intense experiences of humanized distant sufferers. However, by subtly claiming that the West should pay reparations for most of the misfortunes around the world, selectively disclosing the cause of the refugee crisis, and blurring the categories of Western benefactors and persecutors, the program still reiterates China's political identity and sets it against the West. In this case, the politics of pity has given way to a more geopolitical representation of the refugee crisis, with humanitarian urgency being partly qualified by the power and ideological competition and antagonism between China and the West. Secondly, the results of focus groups suggest that the anticipated audience responses are to some extent borne out in talk about this program. For example, overall, an indulgent sentimentality is favored over reflection and judgment. However, the most important finding is that the audience did not repeat the explicit anti-Western sentiment in the news text but instead reinterpreted the asymmetry of power relations to dehumanize and distance refugees.

Our textual research relies on a single-sample qualitative pilot study. Our audience study relied on snowball sampling, which is criticized for its lack of external validity; social-desirability bias was

still present in group discussions. As a result, our findings have little or no statistical generalizability. However, this exploratory study remains within the broader de-Westernizing efforts, compelling us to revisit the paradigmatic conceptualization of the mediation of distant suffering. Given the analysis, and in stark contrast to the dual-pairing power relation between the Western societies and the others that are interpreted solely within the West and non-West binary, the geopolitical realities of China are at least situated within a triangular power relationship. If the polarized power relations that are central to the Western societies run along the line of Western–Orientalist cultures, then the Chinese society may reinterpret and instrumentalize the self–other axis to construct a "threatening" and "barbaric" non-Western other in relation to China's ethno-racial identity, and a "hegemonic" Western other in relation to China's political identity (Zhang, 2019). These more sophisticated power relations are rooted in China's global imaginaries and geopolitical rivalry, and they are intricately intertwined with more broadly national discourse and identity politics. Unfortunately, as is obvious in the intellectual description of distant suffering studies, such triangles are not to be found in the existing scholarship. This is why it is necessary to de-Westernize work in this field, in order to provide researchers with distinctive epistemologies and empirical insights beyond the Western context. This means that the general goal at the moment is not to develop a universally applicable model that can be applied to every context but to increase the diversity of concepts, variables, and analytical frameworks. Against this backdrop, more transnational dialogues and collaborative partnerships around the globe are necessary. Such action would not only avoid a narrow de-Westernization that could lead to new versions of intellectual parochialism in communication studies (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014), but would also expand the ontological horizons of distant suffering studies in a multipolar world.

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3

"Doing denial" and authoritarian audiences

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Today's interconnected and highly mediated societies are brimming with imagery and descriptions of faraway others' catastrophes, from climate catastrophe to virulent pandemics, from armed conflict to world poverty, from economic risk to forced migrations, and from poverty to human rights violations (Cottle, 2014). In these contexts, as part of a moral-ethical turn in media scholarship, an

emerging field of 'distant suffering studies' explores the mediation of human vulnerability as a cause for action in contexts of need and risk (Chouliaraki, 2015: 708).

Much of the existing scholarly work has been based on epistemological debates and textual analysis and focuses on the aesthetic properties and power constellations of media portrayals of distant others' suffering and vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013; Silverstone, 2006). This rich and coherent cluster of research recognizes certain regimes of Foucauldian meanings in media texts, and diagrams representational behaviours that constitute recommendations for audiences to interact with and commit (or not) to mitigate the suffering and alleviate its sources (Orgad and Seu, 2014). Lately, informed by a post-positivist deductive-nomological or post-structuralist inductive-critical stance, we have witnessed a rise in substantial and rigorous audience-centred empirical efforts with a focus on the validation of assumed spectatorship. These empirical studies have predominantly studied audiences' reactions to and interpretations of mediated suffering through the news (Huiberts and Joye, 2019; Kyriakidou, 2017; Scott, 2014; Weikmann and Powell, 2019), and, less often, through PR materials distributed by humanitarian campaigns and development mediators (Seu, 2016; Seu and Orgad, 2017). Given the proliferation of modern technology in the contemporary polymedia milieu, and with the emergence of algorithmically infused platform societies (Van Dijck *et al.*, 2018), a thin but growing body of studies has investigated audience engagement with humanitarian communication through online campaigns and novel medium such as virtual reality (Xu and Zhang, 2022).

Essential to all these studies is the quest to empirically evaluate whether mediated suffering can deepen our sense of cosmopolitan responsibility in the sense of making people more tolerant, hospitable, and reflexive in relation to the distant others (Chouliaraki, 2006), contributing to the processes of cosmopolitan socialisation arising from the global crises of a world risk society (Beck, 2009). Some 'optimistic' findings have illustrated the existence of empathetic connections and action at a distance or a strong sense of agency towards mediated human vulnerability (Huiberts

45

and Joye, 2019; Kyriakidou, 2015). Still, more appreciably, scholars have stressed the idiosyncrasy and plurality of people's engagement with distant suffering using quantitative k-means clustering techniques (Huiberts and Joye, 2019; Weikmann and Powell, 2019) and qualitative taxonomies (Kyriakidou, 2015). They have detected various types of passive spectatorship in audiences' banal lifeworld, such as voyeurism, involving contemplation in awe, and apathy due to the inability to act (Scott, 2014; Seu, 2010).

Of particular concern is that these contributions carefully map a prototypical Western spectatorship, with an a priori assumption that humanitarian disasters occur in the Global South and are outside the direct experience of the majority of the public in the affluent West (Ong, 2015). Scholars have argued that the existing Western gaze on the subject is not to be understood as a mere reflection of Western-centred academia but as the result of a field developed out of an explicit critique of Western media practices and stereotypes of mediating the other (e.g., collectivisation, homogenisation, anonymisation, marketisation, and dehumanisation) (Joye, 2013). Moving beyond the paradigmatic context of the audience of suffering as embedded in Western spatial and ideological dimensions (Kyriakidou, 2021), we can invite the field to reflect upon the 'broad conditions of intellectual production, and propose an epistemic shift' (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014: 361), thus increasing the diversity of analytical variables and frameworks. This 'de-Westernisation' (Joye, 2013: 118) of the field is exemplified by Ong's (2015) ethnography of media audiences in the highly classified society of the Philippines. By investigating the lay moralities of national audiences and power relations between different socio-economic classes, Ong (2015) demonstrates that power also traverses viewing relationships within the Global Southern sphere, between the suffering working class and the wealthy middle classes. This ethnographic study in a non-Western context concludes that the proximal and internal sufferers remain others beyond reach and forces scholarship to re-evaluate key sociological categories, such as compassion fatigue, otherness, and proper distance (see also Chouliaraki, 2015).

However, unfortunately, the study of the audiences of distant suffering in authoritarian regimes

46

characterized by different social realities and political phenomena has received almost no scholarly attention. Of all the non-Western authoritarian countries, China represents a prime example for two reasons. First, China represents a distinct sociocultural and geopolitical context, with a most quintessential form of government-controlled media parallelism (Zhao, 2012). Perhaps more than any other country globally, China's state control over information is deep and far-reaching, and the dominant ideology of authoritarianism has permeated civil society (Cantoni *et al.*, 2017). Second, as the most rapidly growing global power and a rapidly industrialising economy, China's occupation of positions in the international scene and its emerging roles in global politics echo a realist idea of a global power shift from West to East prompted by economic facts. It undoubtedly poses the most significant challenge to Westernized assumptions and conceptualisations about the mediation of distant suffering.

The article takes a step towards ameliorating this gap in knowledge by examining Chinese audiences' responses to mediated distant suffering and their own everyday morality. In particular, to shed light on the dilemmas inherent within cosmopolitan socialisation processes in authoritarian regimes, the article concentrates on how Chinese audiences legitimize their unresponsiveness to mediated victims of global disasters. The literature review section begins by reviewing the existing studies of audiences' passivity in the face of mediated distant suffering and identifies Seu's (2010, 2016) social psychology research as offering a useful means of investigating the ways in which audiences routinely neutralize appeals to act on distant suffering. We then reiterate the importance of the national socio-historical context and specific sociocultural embedding within audience reception of humanitarian communication. Methodologically, we conducted a large-scale audience study involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 81 participants in total. By analysing qualitative data thematically and discursively, the results section discusses the dominant regimes of justification which inform audience inactivity, the associated argumentation strategies and patterns of reasoning, and their sociocultural and ideological underpinnings. In doing so, through the lens

of a non-Western authoritarian context, the article provides much-needed empirical insights into audience decision-making about their moral justification for inactivity, adding to the body of studies on the mediation of distant suffering. It thus expands the ontological horizons of distant suffering studies as embedded in Western spatial and ideological dimensions, particularly in a world of global crises spawned by globalisation and mediatisation.

3.2   THE AUDIENCE OF DISTANT SUFFERING

3.2.1   PASSIVITY AND DENIAL MECHANISMS IN THE FACE OF MEDIATED SUFFERING

For many years, through visual and verbal/multimodal text analysis and general impressionistic analysis, much research on the production of (media) representations has attempted to explain the long-debated issues of why most audiences remain passive in response to mediated suffering and why there is society-wide desensitisation and indifference. Illustrative of such assumed spectatorship is Moeller's (1999) concept of 'compassion fatigue' and the vicious cycle in which the public spirals into stable passivity, apathy, and cynicism due to the repetition, routinisation, and naturalisation of news coverage. Chouliaraki (2006) argues that audiences' lack of agency is mediated through representational repertoires in the news, which are often dehumanized and biased in their construction of the hierarchies of life that define whose misfortune matters. Although these assumptions seem tenable, the fundamental problem is that they often fail to sustain the distinction between media representations and audience receptions (Kyriakidou, 2021; Orgad and Seu, 2014).

Essential to subsequent empirical audience-centric research is the quest to seek sociological and psychological causes of audience passivity in their everyday lifeworld (Schieferdecker, 2021). Specifically, in psychological and behavioural sciences, the realm of the attitude-action gap has listed various psychological traits that might interfere with audiences' prosociality and morally cognitive responses to humanitarian misfortune, such as psychophysical numbness to a large number of losses

48

and victims, and the lack of a strong social dominance orientation and strong beliefs in a just world (Halabi *et al*., 2008). However, these studies were carried out under controlled conditions and with high internal validity in laboratory settings, potentially neglecting the real-life complexity of audiences' moral decision-making processes when consuming mediated events (Seu and Orgad, 2017).

In this context, Seu's (2010, 2016) work on the social psychology of audiences' denial strategies and moral justifications towards international NGOs campaigns has been a particularly productive intellectual resource for clarifying plural, complex, and contentious conceptual and empirical issues. Drawing on Cohen's (2001: 194) general sociology of 'denial and bystanding', Seu (2010) explored a variety of forms of implicatory denial or modes of avoidance that audiences use to discursively legitimize their inaction to human rights appeals. The way to legitimize is usually packaged with 'a plausible, acceptable story about an action' (Seu, 2010: 441) and a technique of moral accounting for the storyteller, such as the psychological techniques of rationalisation, the defence mechanism, and disavowal, as well as the sociological forms of apologies, normalisation, and neutralisation (Cohen, 2001).

Seu (2010) states that the modes of avoidance can be understood as 'interpretative repertoires' (Potter and Wetherell, 1995: 89), which refer to systems of sense-making available in society or collectively available social resources available to all who share a language and culture, which are used by the audiences for their justification and rationalisation (see also Seu, 2016). Each interpretative repertoire contains 'argumentative topoi', a system of public knowledge or a socially shared belief, in which the audience may find arguments for sustaining a conclusion. By adopting analytical techniques from psychology, psychoanalysis, and rhetoric, Seu (2010: 443) identified three repertoires for moral neutralisation: (1) the 'medium is the message' repertoire, in which respondents' unresponsiveness is justified by presenting oneself as being resentful of and resistant to manipulative and formulaic marketing campaigns; (2) the 'shoot the messenger' repertoire, which attacks and distrusts the sender of the humanitarian appeal; (3) the 'babies and bathwater' repertoire, which questions

the validity of the action suggested in the appeal in a variety of ways.

Such analytical frameworks and findings certainly provide signposts for analysing how responses to mediated suffering may, in fact, be coated as justifications. Inspired by Seu's (2010) work, Scott (2015) found two ways of justification for passivity that audiences draw upon vis-à-vis distant suffering online. On some occasions, netizens' inaction is justified by a cyber-sceptical claim that they always get 'lost' in the vast quantity of poorly disorganized online information. On more occasions, netizens position themselves as digital savvy with apparent media literacy, critically demonstrating the untrustworthiness of the material they encountered to justify their unresponsiveness.

Overall, the examination of interpretative repertoires and their argumentative topoi is crucial to our research, enabling us to uncover the culturally available accounts of legitimisation that form the moral passivity in different research contexts (e.g., stimuli, communication medium, media system). The focus of this article is to investigate the authoritarian audience in the face of the Chinese party-state media that is described as an effective tool for authoritarian regimes to shape public opinion (Repnikova, 2017; Zhao, 2012). The first research question for this study is therefore as follows:

> *RQ1: What are the dominant repertoires of denial evoked in authoritarian audiences by party-state news media?*

3.2.2   Context dependency in audience studies of distant suffering

In humanitarian communication, Kyriakidou (2021) argues that some empirical findings are often isolated from the wider national sociopolitical and sociocultural context within which they are embedded, which is a potential blind spot in audience research. Mediation is emphasized by Silverstone (2006) as a dialectical process of communication that is socially, institutionally and technologically driven and embedded, emphasising not only the technological context involving the medium evolution, the forces of capitalism and modernity, and the processes of production and representation,

but also the psychosocial and sociocultural context of media reception (Couldry and Hepp, 2013). As a result, audiences must be perceived to be situated within distinct societal settings with broader political and public discourses that frame audiences' understanding of distant events and the social reality, 'in which the media constitute an indispensable but not an exclusive or even major part of this environment' (Kyriakidou, 2021: 98).

In a more recent study, Schieferdecker (2021) emphasized the importance of societal factors and variables in his integrated model explaining behavioural (non-)response. By fostering cross-fertilisation amongst a plethora of empirical experiences in the field of humanitarian communication and theories and models of media psychology, cognitive psychology and experimental psychology, Schieferdecker (2021) synthesizes a complicated model that combines interpretative audience reception studies with traditional media effects research. This model helps to explain why people remain passive after being deeply moved by media exposure to distant suffering. Apart from the micro level of intra-individual cognitions and emotions, the integrated model presents the meso level of user dispositions and communicative networks (such as psychological traits, social integration and socio-economic position), and the social and societal macro level, involving the public sociopolitical discourse of power and culturally shared meta-narratives and available schemata (Cohen, 2001; Kyriakidou, 2015).

Likewise, some empirical findings have emphasized the importance of social context in mediating suffering. By anthropologically investigating lay moralities in Filipino society, for example, Ong (2015) demonstrates how affective detachment between the Filipino poor and the middle classes informs audience encounters with the proximal suffering of Philippine compatriots. The ways in which these causes for enacting detachment are intertwined relate to the Philippines' classified and overly low-class populated society and the media ecology. Similarly, in Kyriakidou's (2020) study on Greek audiences, respondents' perceived lack of agency and their construction of hierarchies of hospitality for migrants can be linked to the particularities of Greek civic culture and society,

including mistrust in institutions, political cynicism and hegemonic ideas. These scholarly accounts remind us that audience reception of humanitarian communication can be approached as a problem of civic culture as much as a problem of mediation (Kyriakidou, 2021). Otherwise, as Seu (2016: 751) argues, decontextualized research can 'provide only a limited and fragmented picture of what is happening and overlooks the broader patterns and dynamics influencing people's responses to humanitarian crises.'

A plethora of China-focused political communication studies have demonstrated that when Chinese audiences decode mediated events, the societal variables — termed by Kyriakidou (2017: 11) as 'national and local frameworks' — can affect their beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions around the issue. For example, Chinese audiences' reception and perception of world politics is profoundly influenced by the intricate interweaving of domestic politics and geopolitical imaginaries, which can readily generate right-wing populist xenophobia, nativism, and anti-hegemonic hegemonies (Zhang, 2020). When audiences respond to the securitisation of terrorism (Guan and Liu, 2019) and transnational conflicts/disputes (Weiss and Dafoe, 2019), China's nationalistic discourse often re-utilizes a nationalist frame of past humiliation to mobilize a politico-historical memory and geopolitical hostility amongst the public, thus rejuvenating a historically inscribed hatred of 'Western imperialism' that has persisted in Chinese political culture since the end of the Cold War (Callahan, 2010). These findings suggest that sociopolitical contexts and frames may highly or even fully paralyse any potential for civic and political engagement and generate exclusive, antagonistic, and xenophobic public sentiment. Therefore, a second research question is proposed, focused on the role of the sociocultural and ideological landscape in authoritarian public responses to mediated distant suffering.

> *RQ2: How are the repertoires of denial that audiences draw upon informed by their societal contexts?*

3.3 Methods and data

3.3.1 Design and participants

To explore how authoritarian audiences legitimize their inactivity and unresponsiveness to mediated distant suffering, the format of this study was adapted from Seu and Orgad's (2017) interdisciplinary work on mediated humanitarian knowledge. The study involved focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews, all involving the same cohort of respondents. Compared to deductive-nomological quantitative methods based on large-N samples, inductive qualitative methods do not aim to quantify the prevalence of modes of avoidance in audiences at large or deduce more general principles from the given case. Still, the goal of this explorative study is not to look for generalized trends amongst a broader sample of the Chinese audience, but rather to discover the more dominant modes of discourse and singularities amongst audiences. Research with an exploratory and idiosyncratic nature, setting out to take a first step towards understanding a new research agenda, is considered to benefit more from qualitative than from quantitative data (David and Sutton, 2011).

The snowball sampling technique was utilized to recruit focus group respondents. We recruited a few initial seeds who fit the research criteria through informal networks of community organisations. Sampling is a cyclic process that continues until no new themes are found during data collection. The final sample comprised 18 groups with a total of 81 respondents. The respondents varied in terms of gender, educational level, and age, and were a geographically diverse group from urban and rural areas of China.

We structured group conversations around relatively similar age groupings with an even gender mix to encourage positive group dynamics and deliberately avoided both the youngest and oldest media users, as these have demonstrably different media habits (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018) and cosmopolitan dispositions (Scott, 2015). Regarding sociodemographic variables related to geograph-

ical locales and educational level, we kept the homogeneity within the focus groups but achieved eventual diversity across the focus groups. Such group settings may facilitate the interaction of discussion so that common-sense discourses are more vividly negotiated and illustrated, which may encourage respondents to dwell on ideas, argue with their peers and challenge others' opinions, which may result in collecting more realistic discourses and utterances that reflect what respondents truly think.

Group number	Age	Education	Gender	Location
1	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	North
2	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	Northwest
3	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	East
4	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	East
5	35–49	Some high school education	Female	East
6	20–34	Some high school education	Mixed	East
7	20–34	Some high school education	Mixed	North
8	50–70	Some high school education	Mixed	Northwest
9	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	East
10	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	South Central
11	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	North
12	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Male	Northwest
13	35–49	Some high school education	Mixed	Northeast
14	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	Southwest
15	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Female	East
16	20–34	Bachelor's degree or higher	Mixed	East
17	20–34	Some high school education	Mixed	Northwest
18	50–70	Some high school education	Mixed	Northwest
Statistics	M = 33.94; SD = 11.19	60.5% Bachelor's degree or higher 39.5%; Some high school education	53.1% female; 46.9% male	Coastal provinces 38.3%; Inner provinces 61.7%

Table 3.1: Descriptive Characteristics of Focus Groups

However, data generated in one-off group discussions can be contrived as respondents may simply rehearse the dominant discourses of global compassion or humanitarian solidarity, in which the voices that tend to deviate from the norm may be silenced in fear of repercussions from their group peers (Scott, 2014). Furthermore, focus group respondents may be more inclined to express culturally expected views, such as politically correct answers or inconsistent answers, particularly in

China's communication sphere of highly restricted free speech, which precisely creates the divide between a whisper in the mind and verbal or public speech (Boltanski, 1999). For these reasons, the semi-structured face-to-face interview may allow respondents to speak freely about their mediated experiences of distant suffering (Seu and Orgad, 2017), thereby complementing the current study and minimising potentially distorted data. Nineteen respondents were selected from the initial focus groups, on the basis that they formed a representative sample and had volunteered to participate in the follow-up study.

3.3.2 STIMULI AND PROCEDURE

In the focus group study, we conducted 18 group meetings between June and July 2021 with the support of research assistants. Participants were invited first to talk about humanitarian issues in general, for example, knowledge about and interest in the global crisis and international development. After we measured the predispositions and antecedents, participants were asked to watch two 20-minute television news segments.

The news segments were retrieved from China Central Television (CCTV), the country's predominant public broadcaster. Television — in traditional and online streaming forms — remains one of the most powerful forms of government-controlled media available to authoritarian regimes despite the increasing complexity of media ecosystems and fragmentation of audiences, certainly driving the consciousness of news and events amongst the biggest domestic audience in China.

One of the news segments focuses on the Australian bushfires of 2019–2020 that caused substantial economic damage and human misery. The other news segment is about the 2015 European migration 'crisis' and its aftermath up to 2020, in which millions of people from Syria and Afghanistan are being forced to flee their homes due to war, oppression, or disastrous economic circumstances, while European societies are mired in the alarming danger of terrorism. Both stories are deeply emblematic of the global interdependency crisis and are directly tied to questions of injus-

tice and inequality (Cottle, 2014). Moreover, according to Doboš (2019), different spatial contexts and imaginative geographies may contain different predispositions to induce politics of pity. For this reason, the multiple locations of the disaster sites in the news segments allow for investigation of the multivalences of mediated relations between the Chinese public and others. After stimulus exposure, respondents were asked what they thought about these two specific examples, such as the perceived message, and their thoughts and emotions, sense of personal responsibility, and ability to help.

The follow-up individual interviews with 19 participants were conducted in September and October 2021. Each interview procedure consists of two stages. The first stage followed the biographical narrative interviewing method and asked for a story from the participant's life related to caring for people (Seu and Orgad, 2017). The second stage, informed by the above biographical information and the data gathered in focus groups, followed a semi-structured interview, designed to explore individuals' experiences of mediated suffering and their pro-social behaviour and attitude towards humanitarian and international development issues.

3.3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed thematically and discursively. The analysis is data driven, and the coding is a recursive process using NVivo 11. Both the author and a research assistant are native Chinese speakers, and both were involved in the coding. Thematic analysis was used to sketch the broad themes and preliminary patterns that emerged from the focus groups and interviews using the 'scissor-and-sort' technique (Stewart and Shemdasani, 2015). Discursive analysis followed the discursive strategy pattern introduced by Reisigl and Wodak (2009) and Seu (2010, 2016) (see Table 3.3). The analysis pattern was intended to generate typologies of the public discourse, socioculturally laden repertoires, and moral scripts informing audiences' responses. Data analysis was conducted by the author to ensure consistency, and regular meetings were held to discuss any equivocal results with a research

Steps	Question guide
Part 1. Introduction and preliminary	Introduce purpose of focus groups Confidentiality: as always, we will preserve this, so suggest use anonymous identification in the discussion Asking respondents to introduce themselves by first name (to help transcriber identify the different voices in the room)
Part 2. Opening discussion as warm-ups	What do you specifically know about the following disasters? Can you remember what happened – describe the events as remembered: Australia's 2019/20 bushfire season; 2020 terrorist attacks in France; European/Middle Eastern refugee crisis since 2015 Do you know anything about the situation now in the affected areas? Where did you usually get your news about these suffering events? (Newspaper, radio, television, Internet, social media, et cetera?) How do you feel emotionally and morally towards distant "bad news" and sufferers of whom you know nothing and will never meet?
Part 3. Moving onto questions on programming specifics	Test the assumptions/hypothesis of the textual research Begin with watching news programs given by recruiters/researchers and then informally (in conversational way) explore with participant his/her idea of them, for example: What are your initial reactions to the programs? (Cognitive, emotional, behavioural) What do you see as our options for doing something about sufferers during these suffering events? (Prompt if necessary –visit website? sign petition? go on protest? give a donation? or do something else) Have you ever done any of these things? (If not,) what is your image of the types of people who do take such action? How much of a difference do you think doing these things would make? (If none or little difference), how do you feel about this? (explore people's feelings or thoughts on this)
Part 4. Media responsibility	Do you think Chinese media have responsibilities to inform of certain distant suffering? (in follow-up, ask if makes a distinction between newspapers/ television/ radio/ Internet) Do you un/-trust Chinese media? Why? (in follow-up, as the function of the Chinese media. soft power/national image/political propaganda)

Table 3.2: Topic guide

assistant.

Discursive strategy	Purpose	Principal questions
Nomination	Discursive construction of objects, phenomena, processes and actions.	How are suffering and actors (sufferers, benefactors, persecutors, and spectators) referred to linguistically?
Predication	Discursive qualification of objects, phenomena, processes and actions.	What characteristics or qualities are attributed to suffering and actors?
Perspectivation	Positioning the respondent's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance.	From what perspective are these labels and attributions expressed?
Argumentation	Persuading addressees of the validity of specific claims of truth and normative rightness.	By means of which strategies and argumentation schemes do respondents try to provide the validity of specific denial claims?

Table 3.3: A summary of the principal questions to be asked in applying the discursive analysis of audience denial

3.4 Results

3.4.1 Preoccupied with savvy consumption

The analysis finds that the first major obstacle which appeared to prevent participants from morally engaging with distant suffering was a strong distrustfulness and disapprobation towards much of the authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda that they encountered. The following extract is illustrative of the way in which information from the party-state media was denied by many participants for being ideological and prejudicial. After watching a news segment about the bushfires in Australia, the participant positions himself as a reflexive and critical assessor who evaluates and judges the actions of party-state media in generating national identity and safeguarding regime legitimacy.

> This is the most typical form of propaganda ... The party-state media is very good at exploiting the political failures of others and in turn proving the superiority of our political system ... I've always been suspicious of their political manipulation! (M, 32, FG12).

Similar scepticism was expressed regarding the news segment about the displacement crisis worldwide. Participants justified their suspicions using definite analytical methods (e.g., fact-checking). For example, in the following response, the participant demonstrated that the party-state media often appropriate texts from foreign sources to 'fake an aura of legitimacy and authority' (Zou, 2021: 527) to produce maliciously crafted disinformation and mistranslation.

> I checked the original statement Guterres published at UNHCR. This is a complete misinterpretation. Condemning and criticising the West is the real purpose of this news (F, 33, interview 3).

The data suggest that although such denial accounts were more commonly presented in interviews than in the focus groups (being subject to social desirability bias), in both research settings they clearly indicated a stronger scepticism towards the authoritarian messenger — Chinese party-state media at large. As scholars have found (Scott, 2015; Seu, 2010), participants sought to legitimize their unresponsiveness by drawing attention to the unreliability and untrustworthiness of the messenger. In the case of Amnesty International appeals, the international humanitarian agency was positioned as a liar and a 'manipulative and self-serving' messenger by audiences (Seu, 2010: 449). Audiences positioned themselves as victims of a manipulative, messenger-curated consumerist campaign and in need of protection, preoccupied with their own mediated narcissistic self-pity (Chouliaraki, 2013). By contrast, in the context of searching for information about international development online, Scott (2015) found that digital audiences constructed themselves not as manipulated

victims in need of protection but as active media-literate users demonstrating the untrustworthiness of the material they encountered.

In the authoritarian mediated sphere, the messenger repertoire closely corresponds with Scott's (2015) findings. Participants positioned themselves as critical and discerning activists, who were politically savvy and socially astute, rather than victims. During their reception, they developed 'preferences for political liberalism' (Pan and Xu, 2018: 268), thereby displaying opposition to authoritarian ideologies. In other words, they signalled an ability to recognize the intent of the authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda. These participants are generally younger, better educated, and have access to news content at odds with the singular domestic state-propaganda media narratives that are the habitual norm. However, problematically, during their reception participants overly invested their attentiveness and cognitive resources (Schieferdecker, 2021) on their social reflexivity to counter authoritarianism, rather than on the mediated suffering of people forcibly displaced by wars and climate change. For example, we find that by placing the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes and party-state media at the centre of conversations about the plight of distant others, the distant sufferer is either diffused in the audiences' hectic dissident expressions or completely erased from their responses.

Interestingly, on many occasions where forcibly displaced people in the Global South were discussed, participants not only rejected the authoritarian messenger but further proposed solutions to its communicative strategies in order to exemplify a disposition of feeling good about oneself. For example, as a group participant suggested, 'the emotional stories of individual women who are often accompanied by children and the humanitarian appeals delivered by high-profile influencers and celebrities are very important for capturing audiences' attention' (M, 28, FG11). Innocent and vulnerable-looking women and children were identified as 'ideal victims' (Höijer, 2004), while celebrities were identified as financially successful humanitarian mediators and actors. Such neoliberal discourses based on an ironic post-humanitarian solidarity without moral and emotional

weight, which values individual and personal gratification (Chouliaraki, 2013), effectively serves as a technique of neutralisation. Audiences tend to act based on an individualist reflection and a solidarity by slacktivism that skirts over the political factors and socio-economic mechanisms underpinning these crises.

In summary, by turning the complex political problems and global inequalities behind the suffering into problems about the authoritarian messenger and its communication scheme, audiences excused their spectatorish inertia and restored a positive self-image. The main storyline is not one of cosmopolitan responsibility and empathy but one of assessment of the moral responsibilities and social values of the authoritarian messenger.

3.4.2 Deflecting global responsibility away from themselves

The second repertoire of responses relate to disclaimers associated with a backlash against international responsibility-sharing for proliferating and interpenetrating global crises. The analysis shows that audiences mobilized two patterns of reasoning to safeguard themselves from responsibility for the catastrophe of distant others.

'We are a poor developing country'

We find that there is a widely developed mismatch in respondents' perceptions between global phenomena (threats and risks) and regional realities. Participants moved away from looking at vulnerable sufferers and their plight. Instead, they focused on creating the image of China as not only globally responsible but also domestically fragile and poverty-stricken. The following striking example is illustrative of this repertoire and was made in the focus group that exposes respondents to the despairing iconography of forcibly displaced people in the developing Global South.

We are a poor developing country that has done an enormous amount ... However,

there are many domestic issues that must be addressed first … We have far too many

people living in poverty (F, 28, FG3).

While details appeared in a variety of different forms, the general statement that expressed 'we are a poor developing country' appeared in most discussions and interviews and was the most agreed upon. Participants explicitly claimed that Chinese nationals who were struggling with poverty should be the first priority for sympathy; hence they cannot bear a greater sharing of global obligations. Notably, as the above example shows, the sociopolitical discourse of 'too many people' was mobilized as a fundamental source of national identity and as a legitimate discursive strategy to defend their moral passivity. The perception of such national identity is a propagandized result of the population politics in China's past history, fuelled by the scarcity of resources and degradation of the environment (Greenhalgh, 2010). This denial strategy perfectly captures audiences' preference and priority for news about close-by suffering events, demonstrating the existence of a communitarian culture and insurmountable sociocultural distances. Subtly different from other studies (e.g., Huiberts, 2019), the national identity of population politics plays a vital role in constructing family first sympathy and a communitarian culture in the Chinese authoritarian context.

The perception of the national identity is also gained through demarcation from the mediated other. We find that participants perceived China as part of the developing Global South in the face of the news coverage of climate-related hazards in the developed Global North.

As ordinary people in developing countries, we provide aid to people in developed

countries to help with their emergency preparedness? I won't. It doesn't make any

sense (M, 32, Interview 11).

The participant was at his most explicit in using two discursive moves of interpretive denial. First, by intimating that there remains a considerable socio-economic vulnerability gap to climate-related hazards between the developing Global South and developed Global North (Formetta and Feyen,

2019), the participant obfuscated his specific mandate of caring in crisis. Second, by humanising the Australian victims as having 'sovereign agency' to feel, reflect, and act on their fate (Chouliaraki, 2006), with stronger self-sufficiency and self-dependence (Seu, 2016), the participant undermined the force of the moral engagement. Seu (2016) suggests that British audiences expand their humanitarian concerns beyond the West to Japan instead of Haiti because of Japanese self-efficacy and the cultural mirroring and identification of tenacity and civilisation. Interestingly, we observe the opposite reaction in the Chinese authoritarian context, where the beneficiaries' characteristics and behaviour regarding their effectiveness and self-efficacy are not conditions of prosociality, but provide an excuse and moral justification for passivity.

'The West should pay reparations for most of the misfortunes around the world'

In general, participants also chose to attribute the suffering to a cause that is impossible for them to change. Examples of this type of response included: 'Putting a little bandage on refugees' wounds has no precise effect. Our help is at the risk of being pointless because we cannot change global capitalism and hegemony' (M, 28, FG11); 'They've been at war for far too long ... what will my money and sympathy fulfil? Nothing' (M, 32, FG9). In extreme and recurring situations, participants tend to deflect responsibility to the political actors in Western liberal-democratic states. This response is exemplified by the following example, in which the participant perceived the West as the initiator and promoter of the displacement crisis worldwide, after watching the iconic story of Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi's drowning.

> I think the studio anchor made it very clear. This was the result of a game played by Western politicians ... We have no obligation to assist or accept refugees because we have never invaded these countries ... don't forget that we have been victims throughout history (M, 31, Interview 4).

63

The speaker uncritically accepted and re-contextualized state-propaganda media narratives that delegalize Western politics, followed by a statement that China is not obligated to share international responsibility. Most importantly, he finally constructed a dichotomous view of the international order characterized by Western hegemony and other victimhood, reiterating a political identity that positions a hegemonic Western other against the Chinese public (Zhang, 2020). In this sense, the long-held and reactive victimhood complex resulting from a 'politico-historical memory' (Guan and Liu, 2019) of national humiliation is transformed into a collectively available excuse for deflecting global responsibility away from themselves.

In summary, on the basis of evidence we argue that the (mis)understanding and messy interpretation of global responsibility and national identity play significant roles in the perception and reception of the catastrophic aftermath of global crises. In particular, state-propaganda media narratives were used as the source and script to support the respondents' moral reasoning.

3.4.3 Restoring a just-world perception

In the final repertoire, the respondents would mostly construct themselves as 'detached' (Kyriakidou, 2015: 226) voyeurs, reconstructing the distant crisis they witnessed as a story devoid of any moral imperative. The following description of the European refugee crisis is indicative of this denial approach. In discussions, forcibly displaced people were identified with the existential threat of terrorism, as the term 'refugee' was used interchangeably with that of 'terrorist'.

> I was probably more attentive to the news that they were terrorists. This point impressed me the most. Most clearly, they have brought chaos to European life ... You're not sure where their bottom line is ... You never know what outrageous things they can do. That's why I keep my distance from them (M, 24, FG1).

Moreover, there was substantial evidence to suggest that forcibly displaced people were a priori

labelled (in gendered ways) as young men with dark skin whose physical presence and dispositions pose an alleged threat to women, and who therefore tend to be seen as illegitimate and undeserving of pity (Kyriakidou, 2020; Vollmer and Karakayali, 2017). Such nominations and interpretations of the racialized masculine threat became typical resources for the respondents' discourses of victim-blaming.

> I can't forget about the alleged sexual assaults in Cologne. I wouldn't sympathize with these people ... such pitiful people by nature must have an inherent flaw to sink to their low state ... They have endless needs! This is their nature (F, 28, FG3).

The claim that 'such pitiful people by nature must have an inherent flaw to sink to their low state' proved extremely popular and appeared consistently, even though only a few examples are given here. Narrating and judging the forcibly displaced people from the developing Global South as belonging to a generalized category of self-inflicted helplessness and inferiority, devoid of any specificity, seems to result in a failure to establish appropriate emotional and psychological distance. As a result, respondents justify their lack of emotional engagement by emphasising victims' nefarious and insatiable 'nature'. In fact, by devaluing or attributing culpability to the victims, participants provided an unsophisticated form of immanent justice reasoning or the cognitive account of belief in a just world (Seu, 2016). This happens because there is a convergence between the belief that good things happen to good people and their behaviours while bad things happen to bad people and their behaviours in the end. As found in studies in Western contexts (e.g., Seu, 2016), in this case, forcibly displaced people's bad behaviour is not merely characterized as the evil-doing threat but also as perennially demanding and eternally taking. Not giving is therefore justified as reasonable, and in the extreme case of even being potentially commendable, because audiences are working to restore their beliefs in a just world.

In particular, the distinctiveness arising from the categorisation between us, the 'good ones', and

them, the 'bad ones', represents the typical format of the geopolitical imagination in the Chinese public sphere, based on exclusive opposites of us versus ethnic others (Zhang, 2020). This idea is a contemporary mutation of the globally imagined racial hierarchies that are unique to Sinocentric cosmopolitanism, producing a cultural specificity that becomes apparent in a distinction between civilisation and barbarism (Rofel, 2012). As Callahan (2015: 220) argues, 'the civilisation/barbarian distinction that informed Chinese domestic and foreign policy in imperial times is making a comeback today as a model for domestic politics and international affairs.' In this sense, respondents' legitimate claim of inaction was informed by long-standing geopolitical imaginings and cultural stereotypes.

3.5   Conclusion

The study identifies three dominant regimes of justification that inform Chinese audience inactivity towards victims of global disasters. We find that (1) audiences may over-invest in their attentiveness towards their own narcissistic savvy consumption; (2) audiences may choose to deflect global responsibility away from themselves by constructing their national identity and delegitimating the Western actors; (3) audiences may try to restore their beliefs in a just world in the act of motivated reasoning by labelling and imagining the victims as 'others'.

Albeit non-exhaustive or mutually exclusive, the three patterns of denial have implications for our understanding of how audiences engage with mediated suffering and the complexities of their discursive schemas and acts of mental gymnastics. On the one hand, we find that the complexities and plurality of audience reception are contingent upon audiences' relations with the authoritarian media in general and state-propaganda media narratives. As others argue (Scott, 2015; Seu, 2010), the moral horizons of audiences are generated within a broader media context and are permeated by wider relationships with the media. On the other hand, these examples demonstrated how moral

justification is situated in a complex local and geopolitical context, mediated discursively by authoritarian ideology, and constructed utilising cultural resources (Kyriakidou, 2020, 2021; Schieferdecker, 2021; Seu, 2016). In particular, the analysis presented here corroborates and confirms that an ideology of political liberalism, perceptions of national identity and global responsibility, and geopolitical imaginations of otherness play important roles in decision-making about the moral justification for inactivity.

There are a number of important limitations to bear in mind. First, despite efforts to move participants beyond the social desirability bias often associated with one-off focus groups, the multi-stage study design would still have influenced the nature of responses. Due to the recruitment method, a certain degree of self-selection was unavoidable (with an over-representation of educated participants). Second, this qualitative study has not yet sufficiently investigated the audience passivity of distant suffering by considering multi-structural variables, such as cognitive and emotional (psychological) processes, interpersonal networks, structural constraints, and discursively shared scripts (Schieferdecker, 2021).

Nevertheless, this empirical effort has begun to answer the calls for a move beyond the paradigmatic conceptualisation of the spectator of suffering as embedded in the default West, both in spatial and ideological terms (Joye, 2013; Kyriakidou, 2021). It is essential to increase the diversity of formulas of spectatorship in the shifting, complex, and ambivalent sociocultural landscape of this globalized and mediatized world, where events of the West and the non-West are mingled. The study compels us to identify commonalities and differences within existing findings about audience engagement across different media systems, especially given the acute differences between the authoritarian media system and the Western media systems of the developed capitalist democracies. For example, compared to participants in Western audience studies (Seu, 2016), we found that while Chinese participants adopted different sociocultural scripts that constitute communitarianism and post-humanitarianism, they uniformly maintained a clear but highly problematic negative/positive

dichotomy between themselves and mediated sufferers (see also Xu and Zhang, 2022). Future scholars are thus encouraged to de-homogenize the research agenda so that contextual and systematic differences are untangled from wider commonalities, such as media trust. The field of distant suffering can further benefit from more wide-scale, cross-national comparative research.

Overall, however, we see this research as an important first step in examining the audience of distant suffering in authoritarian contexts. This empirical study sheds light on our understanding of the limitations and dilemmas of the process of 'enforced cosmopolitanism' (Beck, 2009) in authoritarian regimes. We have empirically demonstrated that the cosmopolitan disposition is constructed as limited and fragmented, heavily squeezed by ideology and cultural beliefs under authoritarianism. According to Lindell (2015), the 'mediapolis' risks becoming an Atlantis of contemporary media scholarship — a theoretical/epistemological utopia never to be empirically discovered. However, this does not mean that empirical research on the conditions for the formation of cosmopolitanism through audience studies is futile. Instead, if we acknowledge that audiences are powerful political actors and media agenda setters in catalysing social change and that the suffering provide the framework for political engagement, research on the audiences of suffering remains a vast and fertile undertaking requiring substantial empirical effort.

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4

Humanitarian visualizations, journalism cultures, and geographical hierarchies

4.1 INTRODUCTION

From the crowded dinghies floating in the sea to the protestors in solidarity with refugees to the
heroic scenes of rescue, visual journalism has been a powerful agent in chronicling humanitar-

ian crises, shaping public engagement with vulnerability, and inhibiting or supporting societal and political interactions (Azevedo *et al*., 2021; Bleiker *et al*., 2013; Chouliaraki and Stolić, 2019; d'Haenens *et al*., 2019; Martikainen and Sakki, 2021; Parry, 2011; Vestergaard, 2021; Weikmann and Powell, 2019). Initially, it was hoped that news images might serve a role in providing 'moral education' (Chouliaraki, 2008: 838), shaping more progressive forms of a cosmopolitan politics through the power of photographic realism and visual eyewitnessing (Allan, 2014; Azevedo *et al*., 2021; Nilsson, 2020). However, a substantial body of literature that explores the news coverage of refugee crises has shown the aggravating neoliberalization and dehumanization of humanitarian visualizations (Ongenaert *et al*., 2022). The literature argues that news media routinely focuses on negative visuals by highlighting refugees' massification, vilification, infantilization, marginalization or aestheticization.

The motivation for the current research focus was twofold. First, prior studies have primarily sought to understand the role of news imagery in mediating forced migration in the Western public sphere. Although Western-based empirical works have contributed to revealing structural dissonance and the asymmetry of global relations of power in humanitarian communication (Orgad and Seu, 2014), they still limit opportunities for cross-comparison across authoritarian regimes and Western democracies (Xu and Zhang, 2022), ignoring the endemic, interpenetrating, and proliferating nature of global crises pawned by globalization and the changing geopolitical situation (Cottle, 2011; Joye, 2013). Second, prior studies have been primarily limited to specific humanitarian crises, in which forced migration has generally been represented in the media by decontextualized masses from the global South (Ongenaert *et al*., 2022; Scott *et al*., 2021), often neglecting the underlying materiality and realism of imaginative geographies in humanitarian communication (Doboš, 2019). For example, we know very little about how vulnerable refugees of European origin are visually portrayed in the news media when fleeing conflict and war.

This article takes a step towards ameliorating this gap in knowledge by assessing and comparing

how the news media in authoritarian regimes and Western democracies visually frame the Afghanistan refugee crisis in 2021 and the Ukraine refugee crisis in 2022. To begin, we present a conceptual discussion of humanitarian visualizations, the media system's role in the process of cosmopolitan socialization, and the geographical focus of mediated suffering, followed by an inductive-then-deductive framing approach to the photojournalism data that covers twelve leading professional media outlets in the UK, the US, and China, spanning 2,572 images. First, to avoid divorcing frames from their socio-political contexts (Carragee and Roefs, 2004), we conducted a semi-inductive analysis to develop a typology of frames embedded in the news visuals. Second, the proposed deductive framing analysis can be utilized to further illustrate the prevalence of these visual frames as well as the characteristics of each country in using frames during a certain crisis.

4.2 Theoretical framework and expectations

4.2.1 Visualizing humanitarian suffering

Our everyday humanitarian phenomenology is primarily pictorial and visual, generating a large number of theoretical and analytical debates on the ethical and political challenges of witnessing human suffering as a cause for action (d'Haenens *et al.*, 2019; Vestergaard, 2021). For instance, Chouliaraki and Stolić (2017, 2019) argued that media visualities and photojournalism are not only a key space of moralization that produces and regulates public dispositions towards collectively taking responsibility for the plight of distant others, but also a political practice that connects those who come and those who host within the existing geopolitical and cultural power relations of global migration. Central to all looming debates is the problematization of visual representations of the plight of suffering others in the news media, especially in a media culture that is powered by using images at unprecedented levels.

Communication scholars have primarily debated the generalizing representations of human vul-

nerability that have been widely criticized for dehumanizing suffering (Vestergaard, 2021). This effect is seen with the use of images featuring masses of people walking to reach a border as a trope of forced migration (Famulari, 2020), or with large groups of people being managed by police and military personnel serving as the most common trope of a security threat (Hansen *et al.*, 2021). Numerous empirical studies take this dehumanizing argument as their point of departure. For example, using visible facial features as a proxy for humanization, Bleiker *et al.* (2013) found that asylum seekers appearing in the Australian media have primarily been represented as medium or large groups. These dehumanizing visual patterns reinforce a politics of fear that obstructs a compassionate political response. Chouliaraki and Stolić (2019) undertook a conceptually-driven semiotic and taxonomic analyses of Western news coverage of the European refugee crisis; the study demonstrated that the biopolitical and necropolitical visualities of generalizing representations are ultimately subordinate to visual proposals of military or paternalist duty that prioritize Europe's territorial sovereignty and humanitarian securitization over the value of human lives. Such visual representation thereby consolidates the power relations of the border and of humanitarian saviour logics (Ongenaert *et al.*, 2022).

By contrast, the individualization of suffering has the potential to offer a more humanized representation that can stimulate the identifiable victim effect (Slovic, 2007) whereby audiences engage in more pro-social ways, thereby enabling identification and affective connection among publics under the conditions of a neoliberal political economy of global humanitarianism. However, these individualizing representations that rely on the logics of innocence and need are commonly criticized for not only sensationalizing and feminizing or infantilizing suffering (Mannik, 2012), but also for trivializing it and silencing history and politics (Vestergaard, 2021).

Beyond the binaries of generalization and individualization, humanitarian visualizations have sought to constitute an ironic self-oriented post humanitarian solidarity through visualities that are either overshadowed by the glamorous presence of celebrity or fictionalized by the digital drawings

of social media and platforms (Chouliaraki, 2013). These humanitarian visualizations mirror the dehumanizing condition of voicelessness (Siapera and Creta, 2020), whereby the defense of solidarity takes place at the cost of marginalizing and excluding refugees' visualities. For example, while generally effective in mobilizing donations, celebrity advocacy inevitably privileges the consumption of individualized elite voices over collective action around questions of solidarity and injustice (Brockington, 2021). Likewise, cartographies and data visualizations of refugee crises that make use of invasion arrows to highlight migration issues are widely disseminated in mainstream media, educational resources, and public engagements, but they constitute a cartopolitics that exacerbates migrants' otherness and perpetuates exclusionary policies (Gomis, 2022).

Selected visual representations of humanitarian suffering are produced within specific cultural and political circumstances, and largely to meet journalistic needs and routines, such as the evaluation of newsworthiness and the construction of media frames (D'Angelo, 2018; De Vreese, 2005). The concept of framing, similar to concepts of the explanatory theme and discourse analysis, is used to investigate how news media and audiences co-construct the meaning of news events. A broader interpretation is indebted to the definition of a frame as 'the central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events' (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 143), promoting a 'particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 1993: 52). Put simply, a frame is an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic (De Vreese, 2005). Through the process of evaluating framing, we may decipher how diverse representational modalities may shape public attitudes, perceptions, or behaviours on a variety of public affairs and issues, as well as the agenda-setting of news organizations (Miller and Roberts, 2010). This approach is arguably more suitable for the understanding of journalistic work than alternative approaches (Ophir *et al*., 2021).

Despite the prevalence of analyses of verbal information, it is nevertheless evident that the use of visualities carries significant power in the framing effort. According to Messaris and Abraham

(2001), the inherent characteristics of visuals, such as their iconicity, indexicality, and syntactic implicitness, make them effective means for framing and articulating ideological messages. Additionally, media effects research rooted in cognition and neuroscience suggests that news imageries act to draw in audiences through vivid, evocative, and emotive portrayals, and in doing so, they can more easily tap into audiences' subconscious and non-linguistic responses (Williams and Newton, 2007), and promote their attentional processing (Bucher and Schumacher, 2006).

Existing research has demonstrated that the two most recurrent visual frames of forcibly displaced people represent refugees as either victims or as threats in media spaces of publicity (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016; Ongenaert *et al*., 2022; Vollmer and Karakayali, 2017). On the one hand, refugees flee war and poverty, risking their lives to reach safety, and emerge as victims of geopolitical conflict in need of humanitarian protection; most typically they are characterized by powerless vulnerability, inferiority, and a lack of self-autonomy. On the other hand, the refugee forms an economic, sociocultural, health and/or security threat and/or burden to the nation-based order and is to be excluded from the zone of safety. Chouliaraki and Stolić (2017) expanded on the polarized framing of victimhood and threat in their analysis of European newspaper visuals of the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, developing a more complex typology of visibilities that reflects a range of practices of responsible agency, from monitorial to empathetic to self-reflexive citizenship. This complication in framing typologies is also mirrored in other empirical studies. Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) explored the ways in which US transnational news conglomerates and German national leading news media used visual frames of human interest, xenophobia/intolerance, lose/gain, law and control, and politics during the European refugee crisis. In their analysis of visualizations of the refugee crisis in a Finnish national newspaper, Martikainen and Sakki (2021) identified six visual strategies that are used to dehumanize refugees, namely massification, separation, passivation, demonization, individualization, and recontextualization of sufferers.

Although these studies provide a knowledge base, they are primarily limited to the 'European

79

refugee crisis' of 2015, which is 'problematic' as it means that foundational work in the field is relatively dated. Media coverage and visuals can change drastically over time with transformations in journalistic routines and practices, and can vary across contexts (Van Gorp, 2010), as can the socio-political discourse, cultural norms, and humanistic values (Johnson, 2018). Moreover, as alluded earlier, the scholarship has limited itself to surveying the news media in Western democracies. Hence, the first goal of this study is to develop and advance the current categories of visual framing.

> *RQ1. What visual frames did news media from the UK, the US, and China apply in their news coverage of refugee crises?*

4.2.2 Journalism cultures and media systems in cosmopolitan socialization

News reporting on a range of public affairs and issues is influenced by different political interests, social engagement, and, perhaps most significantly, journalism culture (Hanitzsch *et al*., 2011; Henkel *et al*., 2019). Journalism culture supposedly leads reporting to fall in line with pre-defined, ideologically-informed patterns of reporting whenever reporters make sense of a story. Hanitzsch *et al*. (2011) discovered disparities in journalism culture by investigating journalists' institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies across nations. They found that Western journalists are generally less supportive of any active promotion of particular values, ideas and social change, and they adhere more to seemingly universal principles in their ethical decisions. Journalists from non-Western or authoritarian contexts tend to be more interventionist in how they perceive their role and more collaborative with those in power. These journalists are more subjective, less empiricist, more likely to provide analysis, and more flexible in their ethical views than journalists in the West.

Numerous framing studies have identified that different journalism cultures inevitably filter into the news-making process and inflect news values and organizational routines when framing humanitarian crises and suffering. For example, Fahmy (2010) found that the US transnational press

emphasized the human suffering of 9/11 and downplayed the civilian casualties and moral guilt of implementing military force in Afghanistan by focusing on a pro-war frame that showcased complex military high-tech operations and patriotic pictures; by comparison, the Saudi transnational press focused less on the victims and more on the material destruction of 9/11 and instead humanized the victims of the Afghan War. Jiang *et al*. (2021, 2022) found that, compared to European newspapers, Chinese newspapers focus more on political responses and policies, such as the reception or the refusal of refugees or the government's role as a global power in international politics, rather than on public interest themes such as post-arrival integration, the journey of refugees, and racism.

In this sense, journalism culture is inextricably related to the national media system. By disseminating stories of suffering from the outside world, media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) that influence the character of various news media outlets are undoubtedly the key agents to cultivate what Silverstone (2007) referred to as the 'mediapolis' that fosters cosmopolitan sensibilities among citizens (Lindell, 2015). Current humanitarian communication literature focuses primarily on the Western media model of the developed capitalist democracies. Initially, it was hoped that the Western democratic model would shape more progressive forms of cosmopolitan politics (Silverstone, 2007). However, Lindell's (2015) cross-sectional research suggests that all Western media systems — the Polarized Pluralist, Democratic Corporatist, and Liberal models — were equally ineffective at promoting transnational solidarity or the egalitarian action of political practices of global solidarity. This can be the result of many factors, such as the dissonance between moral power and geographical regions, the patterns of economic and political agency that span regions of global influence, geographical and cultural proximity, or (neo)colonial traditions of Western superiority (for more discussion see Chouliaraki, 2013).

Compared with these 'most similar systems' (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 6) in Western democracies, the Chinese media system is one of the 'most dissimilar systems' reflecting the non-Western empirical reality (Zhao, 2012: 8). China provides a case study of the most quintessential form of

government-controlled media parallelism; perhaps more than any other country globally, China's state control over information is deep and far-reaching, and the dominant ideology of authoritarianism has permeated civil society (Cantoni *et al.*, 2017). In particular, existing studies have argued that Chinese authoritarian media is profoundly cultural and geopolitical in its manner of reporting distant events (Guan and Liu, 2019). For these reasons, we hypothesize that differences in national media systems and news cultures — particularly across liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes — affect the use of news frames.

> *RQ2. Does the use of visual frames vary significantly by journalism culture in media systems?*

4.2.3 Geographical hierarchies in inducing politics of pity

There is a crucial need to be spatially sensitive in all treatments of humanitarian communication (Doboš, 2019), which has been described as representing a 'geographical turn' in media studies (Couldry and McCarthy, 2004). In other words, it is crucial to ask where humanitarian crises in the news are originating from, or to know the geographical origin of those seeking asylum (Cooper *et al.*, 2020). As a pioneering piece of humanitarian communication, Chouliaraki's (2006) 'analytics of mediation' focuses on how the spatiality of distant suffering influences the growth of pity and dispositions to action, with regards to the suffering to which spectators are exposed. This analytical framework operates with a distinction between the Western and non-Western sufferers, in which some spatial influence is made visible. In particular, this distinction construes a hierarchy of news that corresponds to the broader hierarchy in global relations of power and reflects the historical fact that some places, and therefore some human lives, deserve more news resources and more public attention than others (Scott *et al.*, 2021).

However, Doboš (2019) argues that the spatiality of the analytics of mediation is only structured

by news discourse, and the question of how spatiality can structure the discourse itself has been omitted. At the heart of such an argument is the question of how space produces communication and not just how communication produces space. By adapting post-colonial and critical spatial theories that were elaborated in post-colonial geography, Doboš (2019) further emphasizes that media performances occur in a manner that both contains and makes imaginative geographies, in that the materiality and realism of the colonized majority world may contain different predispositions to induce politics of pity. By empirically analyzing news pieces about the wars in Mali, Palestine, and Syria as represented on Czech Television, Doboš (2019) showed that imaginative geographies behave differently in how they make different things different.

The focus on geographic hierarchies was also evident in audience reception studies of humanitarian communication. For example, Seu (2016) finds that British audiences expand their humanitarian concerns beyond the West to Japan instead of Haiti because of Japanese self-efficacy and the process of cultural mirroring and identification with tenacity and civilization. Likewise, Kyriakidou (2020) finds that hierarchies of deservingness and hospitality towards refugees draw upon media narratives, broader political discourses and cultural beliefs about religion, gender and class. Greek participants positioned Syrian refugees as 'better guests' in the national space due to perceived cultural similarities with Western 'secular' values. Additionally, Xu and Zhang (2022) discover that Chinese authoritarian audiences view sufferers in the global South through an ethno-racial identity lens and victims in the global North through a political identity lens.

Overall, previous research has continuously revealed that coverage of suffering makes distinctions between sufferers based on the prevailing power relations and geographical and cultural proximity. The recent Ukrainian crisis highlights the importance of this issue, as the plight of Ukrainian refugees is somehow perceived as more shocking and disturbing due to their shared identity as European neighbours, compared to the plight of refugees from the global South, where war and suffering are often depicted as a normality by the media. Therefore, we further ask:

RQ3. Does the use of visual frames vary significantly by the geography of humanitarian disasters and suffering?

4.3   MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

4.3.1   SAMPLING AND DATA

This study investigates the occurrence of visual frames in humanitarian crisis news across twelve news outlets from the UK, the US, and China. Our selected countries have different political, economic, and social structures, media systems, and journalism cultures. As typical sampled contexts for humanitarian communication, both the UK and US are not only viewed as important agents in the Western politics of humanitarianism, but they have also been criticized for taking in relatively few refugees as well as for stigmatizing asylum seekers in the mediated space (Cooper *et al.*, 2020; Hickerson and Dunsmore, 2016). China, although not directly involved in the refugee issue and far away from the scene, has remade the landscape of global politics since its geopolitical power shift, elevated by its economic success and rapid global impact. What is more, Chinese media reports of the Western refugee-related crises and issues have been partly entangled in Chinese politics in a discourse and mentality belonging to the long-sustained nationalistic ideological traditions of negatively framing the West (Guan and Liu, 2019).

The sampled news outlets are leading professional organizations in each country's media landscape, comprising three newspaper websites and one mainstream broadcaster website for each territory (see Table 4.1). Following the sampling strategies of Pan *et al.* (2019) and Famulari (2020), and given the variety of media systems across countries, the news outlets chosen for this study are representative of the country's news media landscape to the greatest possible extent, have significant online traffic, and can potentially reach audiences of millions. To mitigate against ideological bias, data were collected for Western newspapers from both liberal- and conservative-leaning broadsheet

84

The UK	(N = 1,004)	The US	(N = 1,057)	China	(N = 511)
The Guardian	24.6%	The New York Times	27.0%	People's Daily	39.3%
The Times	26.5%	The Wall Street Journal	20.4%	Global Times	20.2%
The Daily Mail	22.1%	USA Today	29.5%	Southern Metropolis Daily	17.4%
BBC	26.8%	CNN	23.1%	CGTN	23.1%

Table 4.1: Sample of news outlets

newspapers and one middle-market tabloid in each country. This data strategy captured a substantial part of the Western visual space within which the displacement crisis was narrated (Chouliaraki and Stolić, 2019). Considering the peculiarities of China's authoritarian media system, we selected two party-sponsored newspapers and one market-oriented newspaper that has been renowned for long-standing critical reporting (Repnikova, 2017). Furthermore, news images from the global news networks in each country were included to ensure the sample is as varied as possible. Because of the transnational media's position at the intersection of various cultural, political and economic environments, they are arguably a crucial forum in which news outlets compete to establish interpretations and analyses that are accorded serious weight (Fahmy, 2010).

The empirical purpose of this study was met by sampling news images pertaining to humanitarian issues arising from the 2021 Afghanistan crisis and the most recent crisis in Ukraine. The sample also constitutes a temporally limited and logical entity. The UNHCR (n.d.) recently proclaimed Ukraine to be in the highest degree of humanitarian emergency, with over 5.6 million individual Ukrainian refugees documented across Europe in 2022. A half-year time frame was used for analysis, beginning with the date of 24 February 2022 when the Russian Federation's armed attack against Ukraine started. The Afghanistan crisis, affected by recurring conflicts for over 40 years, resulted in 3.4 million people being internally displaced by 31 December 2021 (UNHCR, n.d.). A

half-year time frame from 14 April 2021 was adopted for the sample, with the date coinciding with the announcement of the unilateral withdrawal of US troops by the US President Joe Biden.

Overall, we gathered the visual data using a supervised machine learning scraper that interrogated the streaming application programming interface of news outlets' digital archives and sites. The unit of analysis was the individual photograph. Since news websites are built with different designs and architectures, we adapted the scraper for every single website. A final sample containing 2,572 news images was collected.

4.3.2 Coding and measures

A deductive technique is commonly used in empirical research on framing, in which analysts manually identify predetermined, theoretically-based, and established generic and issue-specific frames in datasets (Matthes and Kohring, 2008; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). A few scholars were also able to discover frames using a qualitative thematic analysis of small samples from an interpretative paradigm (Chouliaraki and Stolić; 2017, Zhang and Luther, 2019). These methodologies are heavily reliant on prior knowledge and theory to identify and cluster the frame elements around overarching themes (Van Gorp, 2010). Computational scholarship has recently developed machine learning-based automated techniques or natural language processing that substantially minimize the reliance on manual coding for framing analysis of text data (e.g., Baden, 2018; Walter and Ophir, 2019). However, in this case, the prospect for automatically coding and processing visual data based on computer vision and a convolutional neural network (Araujo *et al*., 2020; Joo and Steinert-Threlkeld, 2022) may be limited due to a reliance on features and outputs of existing (pre-trained) models that are difficult to relate to more sophisticated image classification in humanitarian visualization. For these reasons and limitations, to improve the reliability and validity of visual framing analysis, we adapted a three-step inductive-then-deductive approach described below (Gruber, 2022; Van Gorp, 2010).

In the first process, coding was split down into smaller, more clearly defined categories using Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) visual framing classification (Famulari, 2020), making coding decisions more controllable and transparent (Gruber, 2022). Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) classify visual framing into four categories: denotative, stylistic, connotative, and ideological. The first level, the denotative, depicts what is really displayed in the images, and hence who and what is depicted in the images. The stylistic level is connected to stylistic norms and technical alterations, such as camera shots, camera angles, and action. The connotative level is associated with ideas and concepts associated with the persons or things depicted, and the ideological level draws together symbols and stylistic traits in order to interpret and comprehend why a subject was taken. Analytically, scholars suggest that the denotative and stylistic levels of visual framing are especially a good fit for a quantitative content analysis using manifest variables (Famulari, 2020). This strategy allowed for the seamless incorporation of new categories found in the dataset while drawing on the body of literature reviewed above. In so doing, the frame elements described in the literature were split into content analysis codes.

In the second step, based on the developed codebook, all news images were manually coded. Each content analysis code is coded as 1 (yes) if it appears in a news image and coded as 0 (no) otherwise. For each coded news image, the calculated average score of items under each frame category was used to denote the frame score. As a result, the calculated frame index was a continuous variable, with scores ranging from 0.00 (absence) to 1.00 (presence). The frame score captures the degree to which a certain frame characterizes a news image. This data was coded by two well-trained coders. Inter-coder reliability ranged between 0.743 and a perfect value of 1.000 using Krippendorff's α (alpha) and Cohen's k (kappa) measures — any initial disagreements were resolved by the first coder (see Table 4.3). Some codes were deleted from the coding procedure because less than 1% of images applied this particular frame.

In the third step, after the visual data had been coded, frames were statistically detected using

Variables	Codes	Item wordings
Main actors (denotative level)	1. Massification	Does the image depict a panorama of a mass of asylum seekers?
	2. Fetishization†	Does the image depict the fragmented bodies of asylum seekers?
	3. Numbering†	Does the image include cartographic and numerical aggregation?
	4. Individualization	Does the image depict specific innocent and vulnerable-looking victims (e.g., smiling/crying children, exhausted parents carrying babies, families gathering outside a tent to eat dinner)?
	5. Feminization/Infantilization	Does the image depict only female adults, only children, or female adults with children?
	6. Threatening masculinity†	Does the image depict aggressive young men?
	7. Border guards†	Does the image contain armed police or soldiers, or security personnel?
	8. Politicians	Does the image contain politicians at any level of government?
	9. Hosts*	Does the image contain the people in the host countries?
	10. Rescuers†	Does the image contain the staff members from charities or humanitarian organizations?
Spectacle (denotative level)	11. National borders	Does the image depict the spectacles of national borders (e.g., iron net, biometrics in refugee registration and verification, identity document)?
	12. Hospitality*	Does the image contain the visual elements of solidarity (e.g., "welcome refugees" and "no war" banner and slogan, flag of victim country)?
	13. Dramatic spectacle	Does the image depict the spectacle of "bare life"? (e.g., famine-stricken streets, dinghies, refugee camps)
Key actions (stylistic level)	14. Military securitization	Does the image mainly contain the practices of securitization? (e.g., security control/guard/policy)?
	15. Pro-refugee activities*	Does the image mainly depict hospitable actions? (e.g., pro-refugee protests and marches, refugee resettlement)?
	16. Philanthropic care	Does the image mainly depict the specific action of humanitarian assistance and protection?
	17. Victim activism	Does the image mainly depict the refugees holding posters of protest and fighting for their rights?
	18. Bureaucratic activity*	Does the image mainly depict international or intergovernmental negotiations and conferences? Or does the image mainly depict actions of politicians and policy-makers?
	19. Passive displacement	Does the image mainly depict the passive displacement?
	20. Criminalization	Does the image mainly depict the actions of threat, illegality, insecurity, and crime?
	21. Agency	Does the image mainly depict the visualities of sufferers' positive, self-reliant, and resilient disposition?

Table 4.2: Codebook for manual content analysis

Codes	Krippendorff's alpha	Cohen's kappa
1. Massification	0.965	0.932
2. Fetishization	0.929	0.864
3. Numbering	1.000	1.000
4. Individualization	0.989	0.978
5. Feminization/ Infantilization	0.940	0.885
6. Threatening masculinity	0.952	0.907
7. Border guards	0.965	0.932
8. Politicians	0.933	0.857
9. Hosts	0.853	0.743
10. Rescuers	0.895	0.912
11. National borders	0.922	0.885
12. Hospitality	0.974	0.950
13. Dramatic spectacle	0.955	0.913
14. Military securitization	0.853	0.743
15. Pro-refugee activities	0.985	0.971
16. Philanthropic care	0.888	0.798
17. Victim activism	0.940	0.887
18. Bureaucratic activity	0.908	0.830
19. Passive displacement	0.970	0.942
20. Criminalization	0.980	0.960
21. Agency	0.888	0.798

Table 4.3: The inter-coder reliability for identification task
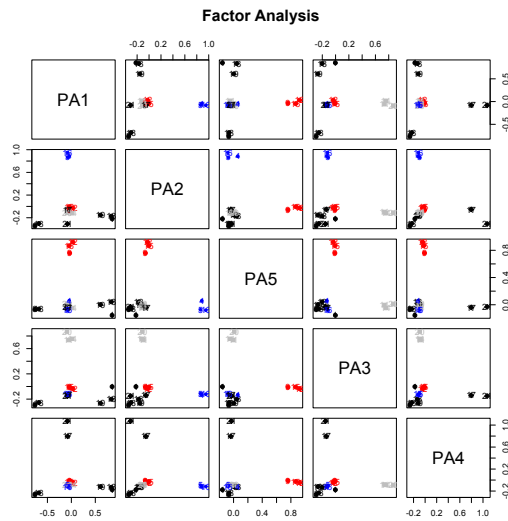
Figure 4.1: Factor loadings of content analysis codes for selected frames

a dimensionality reduction method, specifically factor analysis. The principle of factor analysis is that variables which correlate — i.e., codes which are often used together — are determined by underlying latent dimensions. In this case, the underlying latent dimension is the organizing frame of a news image (Gruber, 2022). Factor analysis is an appropriate technique for aggregating variables that are easy to measure because the underlying latent dimensions are difficult or impossible to measure. To begin, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted, followed by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to corroborate the factor structure (Bartholomé *et al.*, 2017). After frame identification, we look at the variations in the media visualities of the different crisis issues among different media systems using the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedure. Statistical analyses were performed in RStudio.

4.4 Results

4.4.1 Frame identification

For the RQ1, we aim to determine how visual framing of the Afghanistan and Ukraine crises was applied by news outlets from the UK, the US, and China. We performed EFA using the R-package psych with promax rotation to corroborate the proposed factor dimensions. To determine a statistically optimal number of factors, we conducted a parallel analysis, which suggested five factors, cumulatively explaining a total variance of 74%. All items have a factor loading of higher than 0.50, which is usually considered to be an adequate threshold by statistical researchers. A CFA was performed to further validate the factor structure. The values for the chi-square were significant, indicating a bad model fit: $\chi^2 = 164.782$, df = 44, $p < 0.001$. However, this is unsurprising given the large sample size. Thus, alternative fit indices were assessed to determine model fit (Bartholomé *et al.*, 2017). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) were calculated. As expected, the CFI for the model with the five chosen factors is 0.959 which is above the 0.9 threshold usually deemed to be a good model fit. The RMSEA is 0.074, where a value of 0.08 or lower indicates a good fit. Consequently, factor analysis identified five dimensions of visual framing: victimization, biopolitics, hospitality and solidarity, legality and security, and activism.

The victimization frame ($M = 0.38$, $SD = 0.47$) appeared the most frequently. The victimization frame employs a personal visuality to describe the impact of wars and conflicts on individuals with recognizable facial features. The main characteristic of the images appearing under this frame is that they depict individualized victimization and tragedies based on pity, especially spotlighting iconic images of victimized infantilization and feminization (see Figure 4.2A). The second most commonly used frame is that of biopolitics ($M = 0.37$, $SD = 0.46$), which depicts the massified and homogenized vulnerability of sufferers. In this frame, refugees and asylum seekers have primarily

Figure 4.2: Examples of visual frames. (A) Victimization frame (The New York Times, 3 March 2022); (B) Frame of legality and security (The Daily Mail, 23 August 2021); (C) Frame of hospitality and solidarity (The Times, 3 March 2022); (D) Activism frame (The New York Times, 16 August 2021).

been represented as large groups, with a visual focus on famine-stricken streets, dinghies, or refugee camps. Obviously, the findings suggest that the visual frames of victimization and biopolitics became one of the most salient visualities in the news reporting, thereby confirming that stereotypical and dehumanizing approaches remain the default method for reporting refugee and asylum issues.

In addition, the frame of hospitality and solidarity ($M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.30$) was the third most common. In this case, flags of Ukraine, solidarity with Ukraine protests, and anti-war symbols were the most obvious examples (see Figure 4.2B). In the fourth frame of legality and security ($M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.25$), spectacles of border linking to law enforcement, humanitarian securitization, militarization, and potential criminal activity were prevalent (see Figure 4.2C). Not surprisingly, the activism frame ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.18$), indicating acts of citizenship (Stavinoha, 2019), was the least frequent visual frame applied in the news outlets examined. The visual frame of activism suggests the refugees possess agency in the mediated sphere, appearing as political subjects in and through

diverse activities (see Figure 4.2D). In this guise, refugees challenge the regime of securitized human-itarianism at the border and the routine reduction of migrants to symbolize victimhood or threat (Chouliaraki and Stolić, 2019). The marginalization of such a frame confirms the argument of prior studies (Siapera and Creta, 2020; Stavinoha, 2019) that refugees and asylum seekers remain largely invisible and voiceless political subjects in frameworks for humanitarian communication.

4.4.2 FRAME CODING

RQ2 examines whether there would be variation in the visual framing of news among the different countries' news media. MANOVA yielded that the main effect of countries' news outlets is statis-tically significant ($F(2, 2569) = 24.41$, $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.04, 1.00]). Specifically, the results indicate that statistically significant difference existed among these countries' news media in adopting four visual frames: biopolitics ($F = 38.817$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.029$), victimization ($F = 36.407$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.028$), hospitality and solidarity ($F = 21.547$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.016$), and legality and security ($F = 16.128$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.012$). There are no statistical differences in us-ing the activism frames ($F = 2.499$, $p = 0.082$, $\eta^2 = 0.002$). As shown in Figure 4.3, the aggregate figures show that Chinese authoritarian news media used the biopolitics frame most frequently. The UK news media used the frames of victimization and activism more frequently than the others. Comparatively, the frame of hospitality and solidarity as well as the frame of solidarity and activism occurred more often in the US news media.

We subsequently address RQ3 to assess whether there was variation in the visual framing of news during different crises. As expected, MANOVA yielded that the main effect of different suffering geographies is statistically significant and large ($F(1, 2570) = 94.379$, $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.16$, 95% CI [0.13, 1.00]). Specifically, there was a statistically significant difference in each visual frame when comparing the Afghanistan and Ukraine crises: biopolitics ($F = 89.735$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.034$), victimization ($F = 92.607$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.071$), hospitality and solidarity ($F = 136.04$, $p < 0.001$,
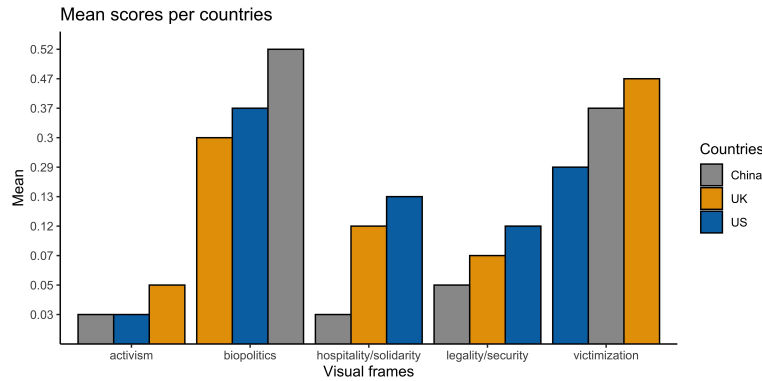
Figure 4.3: Mean scores per countries.

$\eta^2 = 0.050$), legality and security ($F = 196.72, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.035$), and activism ($F = 13.579, p = 0.0002, \eta^2 = 0.005$). As shown in Figure 4.4, perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, the results indicate that the displaced victims from Afghanistan were framed more as visualities in regard to biopolitics and least associated with hospitality and solidarity. By contrast, displaced people fleeing Ukraine were more visibly associated with the frames of victimization and least associated with legality and security. Interestingly, Afghan refugees were visualized as more self-determined and sovereign than Ukrainian refugees in media spaces of publicity.

In order to further probe the key differences among countries and illustrate the characteristics of each country in using frames during different crises, we subsequently performed a post-hoc test to compute multiple pairwise comparisons. In comparative terms, we found that the UK and US media have more similarities to each other than to the Chinese media. First, we looked at the comparison of sampled countries during a particular crisis. We found that the UK ($M = 0.17, SD = 0.37$) and US ($M = 0.22, SD = 0.39$) media were more likely to use the hospitality and solidarity frame compared to Chinese media ($M = 0.05, SD = 0.18$) during the Ukraine crisis, p < 0.001, respec-
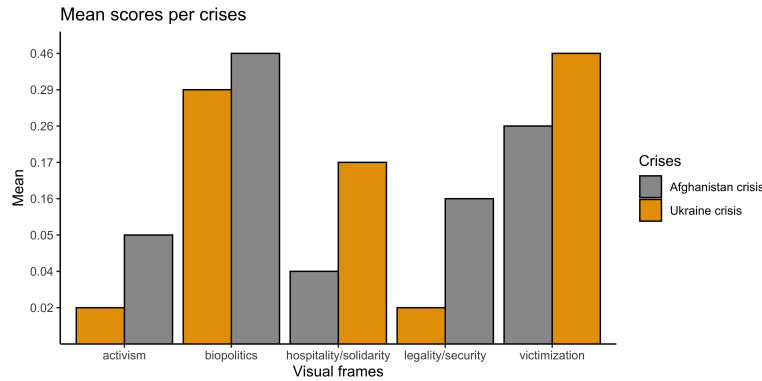
Figure 4.4: Mean scores per crises.

tively (see Figure 4.5). Illustrative of such findings is that the spectacle of hospitality, in which people around the world declare their solidarity with Ukraine, is more frequently visible in Western media, yet this perspective is erased or marginalized in the Chinese authoritarian media sphere. No substantial difference was found between the US and the UK media. Similarly, during the Afghanistan crisis, the frame of legality and security appeared with a noticeably low frequency in Chinese news media ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.12$), while it appeared in the US ($M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.40$) and the UK ($M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.33$) news media with significantly greater frequency, $p < 0.001$, respectively (see Figure 4). This reflects the long-standing communicative strategy of Chinese media to reduce the scope for public opinion on Western experiences and practices of security labelling (Guan and Liu, 2019).

When subsequently looking at the paired comparisons of the Afghanistan and Ukraine crises within a particular country, as shown in Figure 4.6, the magnitude of the difference is substantial for Western media in using the visual frame of hospitality and solidarity ($p < 0.001$, respectively), which is not evident in Chinese media. Likewise, such stark difference was also reflected in the use of the visual frame of legality and security in Western media ($p < 0.001$, respectively). These findings sug-
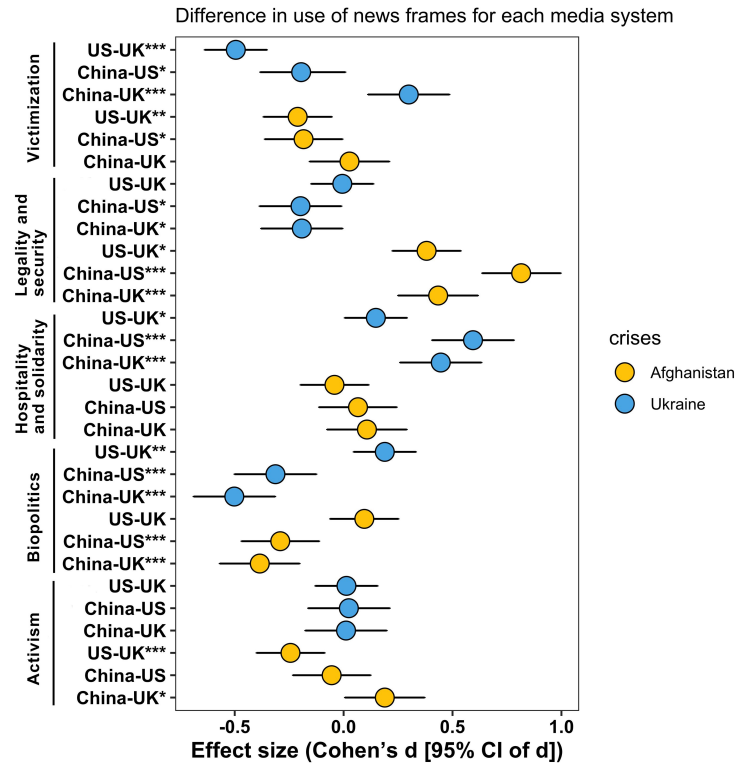
Figure 4.5: Forest plot of comparison of effect sizes (Cohen's d) and 95% confidence intervals between the countries. Signif. codes: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

gest that Western news media constructed hierarchies of hospitality (Kyriakidou, 2020), which not only reflected the power dynamics between host societies and their newcomers but also perceived differences among migrant groups.

Table 4.4: Difference in use of news frames for each media systems

| Frames	Crises	Comparison Groups	Estimate	S.E.	t	Cohen's d [95% CI of d]
Biopolitics	Afghanistan	China –UK***	-0.174	0.034	-5.036	-0.385 [-0.569, -0.202]
Biopolitics	Afghanistan	China –US***	-0.131	0.034	-3.904	-0.291 [-0.469, -0.112]
Biopolitics	Afghanistan	US – UK	0.043	0.030	1.446	0.095 [-0.062, 0.252]
Biopolitics	Ukraine	China –UK***	-0.226	0.035	-6.419	-0.502 [-0.689, -0.314]
Biopolitics	Ukraine	China –US***	-0.141	0.035	-3.988	-0.313 [-0.501, -0.125]
Biopolitics	Ukraine	US – UK**	0.085	0.027	3.162	0.189 [0.046, 0.332]
Victimization	Afghanistan	China –UK	0.012	0.035	0.354	0.027 [-0.156, 0.210]
Victimization	Afghanistan	China –UK	0.012	0.035	0.354	0.027 [-0.156, 0.210]
Victimization	Afghanistan	China –US*	-0.083	0.034	-2.467	-0,184 [-0.362, -0.005]
Victimization	Afghanistan	US – UK**	-0.095	0.030	-3.220	-0.211 [-0.368, -0.054]
Victimization	Ukraine	China –UK***	0.135	0.035	3.829	0.299 [0.112, 0.486]
Victimization	Ukraine	China –US*	-0.088	0.035	-2.492	-0.195 [-0.383, 0.008]
Victimization	Ukraine	US – UK***	-0.224	0.027	-8.288	-0.495 [-0.638, -0.352]
Legality and security	Afghanistan	China –UK***	0.103	0.018	5.665	0.434 [0.250, 0.617]
Legality and security	Afghanistan	China –US***	0.194	0.018	10.939	0.815 [0.636, 0.997]
Legality and security	Afghanistan	US – UK*	0.091	0.016	5.821	0.381 [0.224, 0.538]
Legality and security	Ukraine	China –UK*	-0.046	0.019	-2.460	-0.192 [-0.379, -0.005]
Legality and security	Ukraine	China –US*	-0.047	0.019	-2.526	-0.198 [-0.386, -0.010]
Legality and security	Ukraine	US – UK	-0.001	0.014	-0.099	-0.006 [-0.149, 0.137]
Hospitality and solidarity	Afghanistan	China –UK	0.031	0.022	1.399	0.107 [-0.076, 0.290]
Hospitality and solidarity	Afghanistan	China –US	0.019	0.021	0.880	0.066 [-0.113, 0.244]
Hospitality and solidarity	Afghanistan	US – UK	-0.012	0.019	-0.635	-0.042 [-0.198, 0.115]
Hospitality and solidarity	Ukraine	China –UK***	0.127	0.022	5.706	0.446 [0.259, 0.633]
Hospitality and solidarity	Ukraine	China –US***	0.169	0.022	7.573	0.594 [0.406, 0.782]
Hospitality and solidarity	Ukraine	US – UK*	0.042	0.017	2.482	0.148 [0.005, 0.291]
Activism	Afghanistan	China –UK*	0.034	0.014	2.469	0.189 [0.006, 0.372]
Activism	Afghanistan	China –US	-0.010	0.014	-0.732	-0.055 [-0.233, 0.124]
Activism	Afghanistan	US – UK***	-0.044	0.012	-3.719	-0.244 [-0.400, -0.087]
Activism	Ukraine	China –UK	0.002	0.014	0.140	0.011 [-0.176, 0.198]
Activism	Ukraine	China –US	0.004	0.014	0.311	0.024 [-0.163, 0.212]
Activism	Ukraine	US – UK	0.002	0.011	0.226	0.013 [-0.130, 0.156]
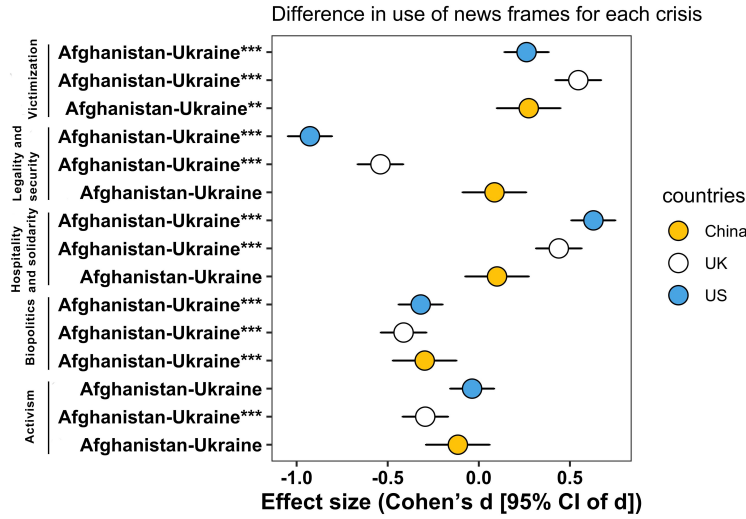
Figure 4.6: Forest plot of comparison of effect sizes (Cohen's d) and 95% confidence intervals between the crises.

Signif. codes: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.

Table 4.5: Difference in use of news frames for each crisis

Frames	Countries	Comparison Groups	Estimate	S.E.	t	Cohen's d [95% CI of d]
Biopolitics	China	Afghanistan – Ukraine***	-0.134	0.040	-3.343	-0.297 [-0.472, -0.123]
Biopolitics	UK	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	-0.186	0.029	-6.490	-0.413 [-0.538, -0.288]
Biopolitics	US	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	-0.144	0.028	-5.184	-0.319 [-0.440, -0.199]
Victimization	China	Afghanistan – Ukraine **	0.124	0.040	3.079	0.274 [0.099, 0.448]
Victimization	UK	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	0.247	0.029	8.570	0.546 [0.421, 0.671]
Victimization	US	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	0.118	0.028	4.254	0.262 [0.141, 0.383]
Legality and security	China	Afghanistan – Ukraine	0.020	0.021	0.963	0.086 [-0.089, 0.260]
Legality and security	UK	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	-0.129	0.015	-8.481	-0.540 [-0.665, -0.415]
Legality and security	US	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	-0.221	0.015	-15.055	-0.927 [-1.048, -0.806]
Hospitality and solidarity	China	Afghanistan – Ukraine	0.029	0.025	1.126	0.100 [-0.074, 0.274]
Hospitality and solidarity	UK	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	0.125	0.018	6.890	0.439 [0.314, 0.564]

Table 4.5 continued						
Hospitality and solidarity	US	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	0.179	0.018	10.206	0.629 [0.508, 0.749]
Activism	China	Afghanistan – Ukraine	-0.021	0.016	-1.299	-0.115 [-0.290, 0.059]
Activism	UK	Afghanistan – Ukraine ***	-0.053	0.012	-4.609	-0.294 [-0.418, -0.169]
Activism	US	Afghanistan – Ukraine	-0.007	0.011	-0.593	-0.037 [-0.157, 0.084]

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

4.5   Discussion and conclusions

The primary aim of this article was to develop a more comprehensive and fine-grained understanding of visual framing in humanitarian news coverage during the refugee crises. By investigating the media visualities of refugees of European origin and global Southern victims, we identified a typology of visual frames and typified the use of these frames in the news media in authoritarian regimes and Western democracies.

First, the visual frames of victimization, biopolitics, hospitality and solidarity, legality and security, and activism that are unveiled in our study are similar to those found in analyses relating to human suffering in times of refugee crises (Bleiker *et al*., 2013; Chouliaraki and Stolić, 2017; Zhang and Hellmueller, 2017; Martikainen and Sakki, 2021). This newly developed typology of framing does not claim to be exhaustive, but it provides a basis for the development of future frame analysis of humanitarian visualizations. Specifically, by adopting an inductive-then-deductive approach on freshly scraped datasets, the typology has the potential to incorporate or reposition frames identified in previous literature and prove that visuals of refugees change with socio-political change. For example, while the victimization frame typified by individualization and the biopolitics frame typified by generalization are still salient, the hospitality and solidarity frame, which has been neglected in previous research, is more prevalent in our data than the legality and security frame.

Second, our results also show that contextual factors, such as journalism culture across media

systems and the geographical origins of suffering, strongly affect the visualization of humanitarian crises. For example, the findings indicated that the displaced people fleeing Ukraine were more visibly associated with the victimization, and hospitality and solidarity frames. Displaced sufferers from Afghanistan were framed more as visualities in regard to biopolitics, activism, and legality and security. Furthermore, news media in authoritarian regimes and Western democracies differed in their framing of humanitarian visualization. These findings in a certain way support he long-standing assumption in the framing literature that geographic hierarchies and geopolitical dynamics influence how media messages about humanitarianism are formed (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2013; Joye, 2013).

Third, by investigating key differences among countries and illustrating the characteristics of each country in using frames during different crises, another significant finding is that the UK and the US news media shared more similarities with each other than with their Chinese counterpart. In the first case, unlike Western media, Chinese authoritarian media marginalized the frame of hospitality and solidarity in the Ukrainian crisis and the frame of legality and security in the Afghanistan crisis. This finding is not unique as previous research has found that framing of the European refugee issue as a humanitarian crisis and securitization threat receives far less coverage than (geo)political themes in China (Jiang *et al.*, 2021, 2022). Such a geopoliticizing tendency could be explained in reference to factors relating to the Chinese news cultures and political economy. For example, the infrequent deployment of the hospitality and solidarity frame in the Ukraine crisis may be due to complex post-Cold war international relations, especially in the context of China's partnership with Russia that is intended to challenge the hegemonic role of the US in the international system (Tao and Xu, 2020). This finding thus demonstrates that Chinese authoritarian media may have played a somewhat politically diffuse role in terms of contributing to public perceptions of the refugee situation, thereby trivializing the urgent nature of the distant humanitarian crises.

In the second case, the findings suggest that the UK and US media coverage establish a hierarchy of hospitality between Afghan and Ukrainian refugees based on prevailing geographical, racial, and

cultural proximity for which there is very little evidence in Chinese media. The Western media positioned refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine as 'more welcoming' guests in their national territory, resulting in a spectacle of transnational and cosmopolitan solidarity. In this sense, Ukraine is part of the 'intragroup' of Western societies and its otherness is partly eliminated. Conversely, Afghan refugees were often stereotypically portrayed as dissimilar others whose arrival calls for security measures. The findings allude to a post-humanitarian form that endorses a growing cultural assimilation and narcissism of helper and receiver that has existed in the Western public (Chouliaraki, 2013; Seu, 2016).

Overall, we conclude that the UK and US media upheld the underlying post humanitarianism stance, while Chinese authoritarian media coverage manifested the geopoliticization of humanitarian emergencies; both approaches have dehumanizing implications. These findings reveal how the present visual depictions of refugee crises in either democracies or authoritarian regimes are becoming problematically entrenched in terms of how they depict humanitarian crises, and in how they prevent opportunities for mobilizing a more cosmopolitan public.

Our study also has a number of limitations. First, although the present study can quantitatively indicate general, structural tendencies and regularities on a large scale, one problem is that the findings provide little insight into the complexities and nuances of these tendencies. Therefore, a future qualitative discursive analysis of social constructionism would be required to triangulate this result (Joye, 2013); audience studies can also play an important role in disentangling the impact of exposure to different visual frames (Ophir *et al*., 2021).

Second, while the results of the factor analysis are encouraging, the framing method adopted in this article still relies on manual coding of frame elements. Especially in the context of the growing availability of visual data in a quantity that overwhelms manual analysis (Araujo *et al*., 2020; Joo and Steinert-Threlkeld, 2022), the imperative for future studies is to develop computational approaches based on computer vision and deep learning that can automatically annotate humanitarian visual

data.

Third, this study does not adopt a long enough time frame to capture the fundamental changes that have occurred in news making, humanitarian communication, and society. In this respect, it may obstruct systematic understanding of the dynamics of change over recent decades arising from the decline of major solidarity narratives, the technologization of humanitarian communication, and increasing neoliberalization and political realism (Chouliaraki, 2013). The field of humanitarian communication can further benefit from more longitudinal research and historical-diachronic perspectives.

Nevertheless, our article contributes by illustrating the role of geographic hierarchies and geopolitical dynamics in mediating humanitarian suffering, thereby adding to the body of studies on the mediation of humanitarianism. Our comparative prism provides empirical insights to compare the differences and commonalities in journalism cultures, political interests, and social values in democracies and authoritarian contexts. More importantly, to the best of our knowledge, this study is one of the first cross-national comparative studies that sheds light on Chinese authoritarian media in terms of humanitarian visualizations. By overcoming the limitations of previous research that relied mostly on Western news sources, our study has implications for expanding the ontological horizons of humanitarian communication studies, which are currently embedded in Western spatial and ideological frameworks.

PUBLICATION

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5

Active spectatorship in digitalization?

The mediated and mediatized society of today is brimming with information about the forced migration and refugee crisis in which billions of people in the Global South are being forced to flee their homes due to war, oppression, or disastrous economic circumstances. A vibrant debate on the responsibility of the media and communication technology toward vulnerable others or global

societal threats has intensified within academic literature and societal commentary. Especially, the recent digitally-driven transformations in today's polymedia milieu have repeatedly pressured the critical scholarship on humanitarian communication to consider how emergent digital technologies are reconfiguring the cosmopolitanizing potential of reporting and mediation (Chouliaraki, 2021; Chouliaraki and Blaagaard, 2013; Madianou, 2019; van Dijck *et al*., 2018).

It is within the context of this shifting terrain of debate that virtual reality (VR) has propelled out from the academic laboratory and blossomed in journalistic practice, gaining high expectations and enthusiasm in the field of humanitarian communication due to its promises of copresence, immediacy, and transcendence (e.g., de la Peña *et al*., 2010; Jones, 2017; Maschio, 2017; Watson, 2017; Irom, 2018; Nash, 2018; van Damme *et al*., 2019; Uskali *et al*., 2020). The revolutionary idea has also already caught the interest of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Action Campaign, which has produced and distributed VR Series for evoking global empathy and encouraging policymakers, philanthropic business owners, and citizens around the world to do something (give a donation), allegedly triggering audiences' empathy. In a 2015 TED talk, for example, the immersive filmmaker Chris Milk invited audiences everywhere to experience the UNVR project "Clouds over Sidra" (Arora and Milk, 2015) about a girl in a Jordanian refugee camp through Google VR Cardboard. Following the lengthy applause and cheers, Milk loudly declared that VR is the "ultimate empathy machine" for profoundly changing their reactions to testimony on humanitarian crises by its capacity to immerse the audience in various environments.

Recent criticisms of the techno-utopianism of digital innovation and big-data-driven practices are reflected in the expression of the concepts of "technocolonialism" (Madianou, 2019) and "data colonialism" (Couldry and Mejias, 2018). They emphasized that digitalized mediation may help to advance a technocratic illusion or technical hype, in which global inequities and power asymmetries are constructed as a purely technical problem amenable to a "logic of solutionism" (Madianou, 2019) rather than as an issue concerning political and economic right (Scott *et al*., 2021). For exam-

ple, although VR artifacts have the potential to nurture deeper empathetic relationships between viewers and refugees (Gruenewald and Witteborn, 2020), they may also "defang the political possibilities of humanitarian communication" (Irom, 2018: 4269). In addition, Chouliaraki (2013) argues that the technicalization of humanitarianism breeds a what's-in-it-for-me ethics of posthumanitarianism among the public. The impact of such a narcissistic public or ironic spectatorship is to relatively lessen the consideration of the political factors and socioeconomic mechanisms underpinning the suffering, sustaining an apolitical and individualist conception of humanitarianism. This conception has in turn failed to convert into a more radical and egalitarian action involving political practices of global solidarity. These eloquences and reflections in recent studies provide insightfully critical perspectives for studies on the cosmopolitan potential of VR (e.g., Hassan, 2019; Irom, 2018, 2021; Nash, 2018; Palmer, 2020; Schlembach and Clewer, 2021).

However, for now, evidence of these productive reflections in VR humanitarian communication remains very much confined to a case-based text- analytical approach. A key challenge in advancing the academic debates of humanitarian communication is to also empirically investigate the extent to which this framework and the assumptions it contains remain relevant when applied to the study of peoples' everyday lives (Scott, 2014). Recent limited laboratory-based hypothetico-deductive audience studies have predominantly probed the relationship between immersion and both empathy and embodiment (Shin and Biocca, 2017) and the effect of hierarchical immersion on news experience about the distant suffering (van Damme *et al.*, 2019). Unfortunately, we rarely understand VR audiences' belief systems, attitude structures, and communicative practices in their mediated experiences of the distant refugee crisis, and whether these mediated experiences promote the cultivation of a cosmopolitan consciousness. This article empirically fills the yet-untreated gap in audience studies of distant suffering through the qualitative interpretative approach of social constructionism.

The article begins with a discussion of the sociotechnical understanding of the unique affor-

dances of VR. Before we conduct the empirical study, the second section identifies three contradictions that exist between techno-utopian and techno-dystopian narratives as a useful framework for discussing the critical studies of mediated humanitarianism in relation to VR. It then develops a set of research questions and the methodology entailed by our own audience study, before presenting and discussing the findings. Drawing upon empirical material from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with VR audiences in China, Germany, and the UK, we conclude that VR may easily construct a depoliticized hyperreality of intense spectacularity and trap audiences within an improper distance, thereby reworking the colonial legacies of humanitarianism while also obfuscating complex asymmetries of power and structural political exclusion.

5.2 WHAT MAKES VR DISTINCT AS A MEDIUM?

VR, as a simulation technique that uses computer graphics to create virtual worlds with realistic configurations, is a technological phenomenon that deserves to be studied within academia (Reis and Coelho, 2018). In recent years, a considerable body of literature within scientific disciplines such as computer science, psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and communication studies has described the unique affordances of VR. The concept of affordances originated in the field of ecological psychology, where it is used to describe the characteristics that the environment provides to animals (Gibson, 1986), but it has recently been adapted within the field of information systems. In this context, affordances are more specifically identified as the possibilities for action afforded to users by technical artifacts (Steffen *et al.*, 2019). While this literature is as diverse as it is extensive, when considering VR as a medium in communication practices, it is possible to identify two main possibilities that improve activity when compared to practices enacted in physical reality: (1) richer user experiences (UXs) than any other screen-based medium, resulting in (2) new levels of emotional engagement.

In terms of the first possibility, as VR continues to seek for novel methods of immersion or "storyliving" (Maschio, 2017) that are designed to facilitate complex audience interactivity, it may lead to a richer mediated (news) experience (Shin and Biocca, 2017; van Damme *et al*., 2019). Of central importance is that with VR, audiences can step into a 360° computer-generated virtual environment (VE) characterized by vividness and interactivity, inhabiting a digital entity representing the news story as if they were living in the story and gaining what academic pioneers of immersive journalism have called the "first-person experience" of distant stories (de la Peña *et al*., 2010). This is achieved through the presence construct, most commonly defined as the sense of "being there" that is informed by an integrated combination of the illusions of (spatial and social) presence, plausibility illusion (Psi), and the appropriation of virtual body ownership or avatar anthropomorphism (IJsselsteijn *et al*., 2000; Lugrin *et al*., 2015; Skarbez *et al*., 2017; Slater and Wilbur, 1997; Steuer, 1992).

Immersive first-person experiences are redefining the rules around narrative structure and storytelling, which challenges the traditional linear narrative and provides a rather high level of agency to viewers (Jones, 2017; Shin, 2018). For example, audiences are invited to explore what the experience reveals and choose their viewpoint instead of passively watching a narrative unfold from outside a rectangle of glass. As Shin (2018: 71) concludes,

> Based on the users' cognitive processes, it can be further inferred that there is a more active role for users in VR . . . the user's role has changed from passive consumer of technologically provided immersion to active creator of immersion.

Secondly, the literature on audience reception has shown that richly experiencing distant stories from a first-person perspective may result in a more powerful emotional engagement (McRoberts, 2018; Sundar *et al*., 2017). Even if the VR system is considered a kind of gamified journalism or as providing an immersive gaming experience of terrorism (Siapera, 2017), de la Peña *et al*. (2010) found that the response mechanism runs instinctively and naturally, generating emotions such as

fear, anxiety, and empathy. In particular, empathy is the most critical concept and factor that frequently arises in research on VR, and it is also the most anticipated. As McRoberts (2018) explains, VR has the capacity to augment emotional and empathic responses toward those who live outside the immediate scope of the user's everyday life.

In summary, immersive technologies are opening gateways to virtual realities that might change communication practices forever (Uskali *et al*., 2020). Particularly within the broad practice of humanitarian communication, VR facilitates the creation of so-called "experiential journalism" (Bunce *et al*., 2019), in which audiences can directly experience distant suffering as it unfolds. Bearing in mind the unique affordances of VR discussed thus far, we further inquired to what extent these qualities have the potential to cultivate a sense of cosmopolitanism among audiences, which is discussed in the following section.

5.3   VR and its paradoxical cosmopolitan potential

Akin to studies in the field of mediated suffering focusing on television (Chouliaraki, 2006) and the Internet (Scott, 2015), there has been a controversial debate regarding the possibility of VR's ethical potential, or the issue of whether VR has the capacity to cultivate a cosmopolitan public. Whereas scholars agree that the particular affordances of VR help in establishing a new connection and manipulating the intimacy between the spectators and distant sufferers, there is controversy over the impact of these affordances on the possibility for cosmopolitan spectators (Irom, 2018, 2021; Nash, 2018). This competing narrative plays out across a number of key concepts in critical studies of mediated humanitarianism: reality, distance, and the hierarchies of human life.

5.3.1   REALITY

The techno-utopian expectation for VR is that it can potentially fill the gap between a real experience and a mediated experience when the audience is immersed in the feeling of being there, creating a capacity from its spectacles of suffering to construct a true-to-life empirical reality (Irom, 2018). This is precisely because the ambition of VR is to use complex computer algorithms to realistically simulate a "real" encounter between audiences and distant actors, not just allow audiences to walk in sufferers' shoes or experience sufferers' misfortune (Nash, 2018). In this regard, VR reflects a broader logic in humanitarian communication in which it typically seeks to construct a kind of "intimate relations" (Orgad and Seu, 2014) between audiences and sufferers (potential beneficiaries) and enables audiences to sit in the territory of distant others and communicate with each other. This intimate exchange is achieved through simulated transportation to the physical space of the other and a simulated exchange.

However, the pessimistic thesis generally argues that the term "reality" itself raises a series of inherent risks in what Baudrillard (1983) called the technologically advanced postmodern society organized around simulation. The reality perceived by the audience through the media is not the reality itself, but the mediated "nebulous hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1983: 44), which effaces authentic experience. Baudrillard (1996) argues that hyperreality is a "perfect crime." The fundamental idea is that hyperreality illustrates a conclusion "more real than the real, that is how the real is abolished" (56). In particular, in the context of VR, such a destruction of reality eliminates the reality itself. Thus, in a sense, even if VR simulates a superficially "real" encounter, allowing the benefactor-audience to enter the scene of suffering and gain first-hand testimony of distant suffering, it still cannot replicate the reality of suffering in a fundamental sense.

5.3.2 Distance

With distance, we refer not only to geographical distance but also to the perceived psychological distance which includes sociocultural and moral distances (Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2007). In general, techno-utopian narratives assert that the process of "passing through the medium" (Tomlinson, 1999: 154) can bring the scene of distant suffering closer to audiences, leading to intimacy and global connectivity. Specifically, VR relies on the affordances of presence and storyliving to implicitly link audiences spatially and temporally to distant suffering. The connectivity has brought distant others closer than ever before, thereby promoting the sense of mediated proximity and removing the distance in a given mediated communication to achieve the desired affective cosmopolitan dispositions and humanitarian decisions (Nash, 2018).

On the contrary, techno-dystopian narratives argue that the media fails to close the symbolic distance between audiences and distant suffering, leading to apathy and negligence. When VR audiences fully occupy the point of view of distant sufferers, VR has the "potential to undermine a moral orientation insofar as it works to obscure the distance between the spectator and other" (Nash, 2018: 7). Jones (2017) demonstrated that intensified proximity to the mediated characters generated discomfort and a sense of intrusion into the viewer's personal space. As a result, Nash (2018) argues that it runs the risk of creating "improper distance" (Chouliaraki, 2011). The production of improper distance in the contemporary mediations that VR provides for us represents a "failure of communication" (Chouliaraki, 2011).

5.3.3 Hierarchies of human life

Regarding the reproduction of hierarchies of human life on which the cultivation of a cosmopolitan consciousness depends (Chouliaraki, 2006), technoutopian narratives believe that VR can at least partially solve the problem of power asymmetries between audiences and distant sufferers. In par-

ticular, VR can potentially address the invisibility or negative visibility of distant sufferers wherein their voices are either muted or heard only after passing through ideological frames that perpetuate the existing power hierarchy (Irom, 2018). This is precisely because the principal cultural attraction of VR is the freedom of the virtual self, and this freedom allows the audience to experience the freedom to explore the virtual world under their own control (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Although such freedom is relatively short-lived and virtually simulated, Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue that it has metaphorical importance for our culture, epitomizing an attitude of cultural relativism that informs much contemporary multiculturalism and a friendly/tolerant interaction style. This cultural relativism inherently challenges the privileged and unequal viewing positions between those who inhabit the transnational zone of safety and those who inhabit the zone of suffering (Nash, 2018), providing vast possibilities for a more egalitarian representation of distant sufferers.

However, problems similar to those in other media will inevitably arise, that is, the potential egalitarianism of VR is a highly contingent and paradoxical dimension that may consolidate or maintain power relations (an economic and political power relations of viewing). VR's flippant dismissal of the structures of representation is infinitely oriented toward the posthumanitarian "mirror structure" (Chouliaraki, 2013), concealing the vital issue about the unequal relationship of power, because it is eager to provide a fully immersive experience that allows audiences to forget their viewing position and fully participate in simulated real suffering scenarios. As Nash (2018) emphasizes, VR, as a new media, promotes a neoliberal transformation in humanitarian communication, taking the spectator's personally empathic feelings as the focus of intervention, rather than highlighting structural inequality and political exclusion. As a result, people are not reminded of the underlying reasons of the complex chains of events behind misfortune and atrocities, thereby obfuscating the complexity of historical power relations and the hegemonic mapping of zones of safety and suffering. The audience can potentially remain trapped within the minefield of hegemonic humanitarianism (Irom, 2018).

A thin but growing body of empirical reception-focused studies of mediated encounters with distant suffering have predominantly focused their attention on audiences in relation to television (Höijer, 2004; Huiberts and Joye, 2019; Kyriakidou, 2015; Ong, 2015; Scott, 2014). Existing audience-centric research which focuses on the emerging challenges of platformization of humanitarian communication is relatively scarce to date.

Within this context, Scott (2015), Pantti (2015), and Huiberts's (2019) studies of audience reactions to online suffering provide not only a rare exception of reception-focused research, but also a framework and signpost for guiding further empirical research. These scholarly accounts have demonstrated that there was little evidence to support the initially posed optimistic hopes of a more (inter)active, global society and a morally engaged audience (see also Kyriakidou, 2021). Rather, an essential facet to these studies is the mapping of a critically pessimistic conclusion that the audience's behavioral unresponsiveness will remain unchanged. For example, as Scott (2015) argues, concerns about what Morozov (2011) called "clicktivism" were seemingly irrelevant, because no one was clicking. With this critical spirit in mind, the present study will first attempt to answer the following research question:

> *RQ 1. To what extent do techno-optimistic assumptions remain relevant when applied to the study of VR audiences' mediated experiences?*

In addition, Seu (2010) and Scott (2015) have highlighted that the audience reception of distant suffering is generated within a broader media context and is permeated by wider discourses about the media. Kyriakidou (2021) and Schieferdecker (2021) have further emphasized the importance of the national sociohistorical context and specific sociocultural embedding of audience reception of humanitarian communication that might have been easily neglected in previous studies. Thus, a further key question considered here is:

RQ 2. How are the audience reactions to VR use informed by their wider media environment and national societal context?

5.5   Methods

5.5.1   Design

Given the qualitative nature that is ascribed to media audiences as they are actively constructing meaning and interpreting media messages (Livingstone, 1998; Morley, 1992), an inductive, qualitative focus group approach was felt to be most appropriate, particularly in researching the mediation of distant suffering (Kyriakidou, 2021) in relation to the novelty of new technologies (Nielsen and Sheets, 2019). The methodology of focus groups was used on the premise that it is through the interaction of discussion that common-sense discourses are more vividly negotiated and illustrated (Billig, 2002). Researchers have to provide an open environment and neutral setting in which differences of opinions can be celebrated and discussed freely, and participants' complex behaviors and motivations can be sighted thoroughly (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996).

However, one-off focus groups still inherently have some potentially problematic aspects, such as social-desirability bias problems. Talks generated in one-off group discussions can be "contrived" (Scott, 2014) and "faked" (Boltanski, 1999) as participants may simply rehearse dominant discourses of global compassion or humanitarian solidarity, in which the voices that tend to deviate from the norm may be silenced in fear of repercussions by the group peers (Scott, 2014). Focus group participants may be more inclined to express culturally expected views, such as politically correct answers or inconsistent answers, which precisely create the divide between privately and publicly held views.

To partially solve this methodological dilemma, we followed significant previous scholarship in combining multi-phases of audience research (e.g., Couldry *et al.*, 2007; Scott, 2014; Seu and Orgad, 2017). We combined focus groups with in-depth interviews by involving the same cohort of

participants in two different phases of study over an extended period of time. The in-depth interview seems to be a vital tool because it can not only probe into how mediated information about distant suffering becomes embedded – or not – in people's ordinary lifeworlds (Seu and Orgad, 2017), but it can also discover an interviewee's articulated and unarticulated (often symbolic) relationship to the VR product or experience (Maschio, 2017).

Another point worth making is that most audience studies in the field of humanitarian communication are still situated and conducted almost exclusively in the default Western context (Ong, 2015). The Western-centric and (often) highly normative realm of academia has been undoubtedly productive in revealing the dissonance and asymmetry between moral power and geographical regions, and the patterns of economic and political agency that span regions of global influence. However, a plethora of Western-based national case studies may constitute a possible tendency toward "methodological nationalism" (Beck, 2009: 22) in that they ignore the endemic, interpenetrating, and proliferating nature of global crises pawned by globalization and the changing geopolitical situation (Cottle, 2014; Joye, 2013) and the variety and nuance in audience reactions across different national sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts. To this end, the cross-country audience study gives us the opportunity to understand audience reception of mediated suffering in contexts other than Western countries, thereby expanding analytical perspectives (Joye, 2013). Especially, in our research, China provides a representative case, as a typically non-Western authoritarian nation. China is also the fastest growing global power, and has a rapidly industrializing economy, a distinct sociocultural and geopolitical context, and a most quintessential form of government-controlled media parallelism.

5.5.2 Recruitment of participants

Participants for the study were recruited in a two-phase process. Six focus groups with 24 participants in total were conducted in China, Germany, and the UK between 2018 and 2020. Two

groups were convened in each country, and each group consisted of four participants. Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method (Kyriakidou, 2014). After the targeted recruitment of the first set of volunteer participants based on age and educational level, the identified participants began to introduce others to participate in the research. The focus groups were homogeneous in age and educational level to create a comfortable and familiar environment, thereby facilitating discussions or the ability to challenge each other comfortably (Huiberts, 2019; Kyriakidou, 2014). Informed by sociodemographic data from the focus groups, and considering availability/accessibility issues, a sample of in-depth interviews consisting of 12 respondents was further identified. Four interviews were convened in each country.

Group number	Locale	Number of participants
1	Norwich, UK	4
2	Norwich, UK	4
3	Shanghai, China	4
4	Shanghai, China	4
5	Cologne, Germany	4
6	Cologne, Germany	4

Table 5.1: Table of focus group composition

5.5.3 RESEARCH PROCEDURE AND STIMULUS MATERIAL

The research procedure took place in participants' private residences rather than in an artificial lab setting, which may ensure the most naturalistic setting possible. This location choice not only addressed the usual external-validity limitations of a laboratory, but also minimized the artificiality of focus groups as a set-up of a social situation. This research procedure is anonymous. The identity of the participant is encoded into a public identifier that can be used to identify the text of the generated data uniquely.

The focus groups and individual interviews consisted of two phases: (1) experimental interventions and (2) discussions and interviews. In the first stage, after signing consent forms, participants were informed that the research was a study on VR news about the refugee crisis, and they were then enrolled in the experiment for experiencing the sampled stimulus material (see Figure 5.1). The example used for the focus groups is a documentary called "The Displaced" produced by The New York Times in 2015. This documentary explores the global refugee crisis through the stories of three children. The example used for the individual interviews is a documentary story called "Clouds Over Sidra" about the Jordan refugee crisis. In this documentary, a 12-year-old girl guides the audience through the Zaatari refugee camp, home to hundreds of thousands of Syrians fleeing violence.

These VR examples can be accessed through the App With.in recommended by the UN SDG Action Campaign, which provides a branded interface for interacting with the VR project through a smart mobile device and head mount display (HMD). A researcher observed participants during the interventions and documented their verbal reactions. After the intervention, in the second stage, discussions and interviews were triggered by questions about the VR stories. As group leaders and research interviewers, the authors prepared a predetermined list which was "loosely designed around the principle research questions" (Seu, 2010: 444).

5.5.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Data were recorded, transcribed, and translated to English where applicable. All texts have been translated by the lead researcher and checked by a native speaker to ensure the accuracy of the translation. The two authors analyzed transcripts inductively and coded excerpts using NVivo 11. Any remaining disagreements were discussed and reconciled. The results of the analysis are organized around the three dimensions of mediated humanitarianism discussed in the literature review: reality, distance, and hierarchies of human life. Our qualitative analysis largely involved clustering relevant quotations into different dimensions and looking for patterns (Scott, 2014, 2015). In most

Figure 5.1: (a) A female focus group participant is experiencing (b) The New York Times VR project "The Displaced"; (c) A female interviewee is experiencing (d) "Clouds Over Sidra".

instances, the quotations that are included in the analysis were selected because they provide the most illustrative, noteworthy and representative representation of audiences' discussion on a particular subject, not because they provided the most extreme examples.

5.6   Results

There were rare occasions in the focus groups and individual interviews when participants' talk did appear to reflect instances in which the particular affordances of VR had achieved optimistic hopes of the more productive and morally cosmopolitan spectatorship. Predominantly, however, the results revealed that participants' talk overwhelmingly mirrored techno-dystopian narratives. These pessimistic arguments seem to organize mainly around the intense spectacularity, inappropriate distance, and depoliticized empathy, which we will now discuss.

5.6.1 Reality: attentiveness on the hyperreality of intense spectacularity

The major problem which appeared to prevent participants from morally engaging with distant suffering was that they were enthralled by the filmic and dramatic spectacularity brought by the novel VR technology to the point where they ignored the inequalities and injustice of the real-world situations. Striking examples of participants' comments included "what a powerful video" (FG4, male, China); "super cool, fantastic use of the technology" (FG6, male, Germany); "absolutely epic work" (FG2, male, UK); "beautiful narration and some lovely shots" (FG3, male, China).

The deeply enthusiastic comments above reflect a "playful consumerism" (Chouliaraki, 2010: 107) and have illustrated that participants appeared to position themselves as cutting-edge technology consumers rather than as eyewitnesses of the misfortunes of refugees, entirely unprovided with any moral obligation to act and any further engagement with the humanitarian crisis unfolding in disaster areas. Such a reception mode is a relatively common occurrence among young males. Findings around different age and gender cohorts do seem to dovetail with previous research on audiences in relation to mainstream media (Kyriakidou, 2015; Scott, 2014; von Engelhardt and Jansz, 2014) and social networking sites (Scott, 2015). Although young male audiences, as consumers of "entertainment cosmopolitanism" (Urry, 2000) centered on global culture, show a greater degree of media literacy or would not get "lost" (Scott, 2015: 647) in the digital mediated experience, they were far more willing to admit their great interest in VR as a new "commodity spectacle" (Hassan, 2019: 14) machine, rather than in injustices and humanitarian crises.

We found that the primary reason why participants are passionate about VR technology while being passive and unresponsive to crisis events is the problem of "attentiveness" emphasized by Schieferdecker (2021) in his integrated model explaining behavioral (non-)response. For instance, participants overly praise the performance of the "real" interaction itself, rather than caring about who they interact with, or understanding cognitively and emotionally caring for and engaging with

distant victims. According to a focus group participant,

> (FG5) I believe that VR will present us with the most amazing experiences imagin-
> able! VR brightens my outlook on the future, and interaction through changing
> viewpoints via VR sounds like a fantastic potential . . . I can't wait for truly immer-
> sive VR that sends messages to our brains, as shown in The Matrix (male, 29 years
> old, Germany).

Similarly, in the following excerpt, an interviewee who positions himself as a techno-enthusiast and media-savvy consumer confirms the immersed feeling of being there, yet has almost no memory or comment on the content of the documentary.

> (Interviewee 6) This video is breathtaking and . . . the high quality astounded me . . .
> I can really feel that I'm there. But sorry, I forgot which country's story this is telling?
> It is always in Arab countries anyway (male, 28 years old, China).

In this case, the lapsing and fading of the participant's "mediated memories" (Kyriakidou, 2014: 1474) challenges optimistic expectations of combating the problem of compassion fatigue through an immersive experience that breaks with the earlier two-dimensional experience. This is because although VR immersion does place participants in virtual refugee camps, it fails to nurture deeper empathetic relationships and intimate relations between them and the refugees. Rather, by end-ing with this statement – "it is always in Arab countries anyway" – the participant normalized and routinized the idea of geographies of distant suffering "that's always happening in places like that" (Cohen, 2001: 189). This is also constitutive of what Chouliaraki (2006) describes as a "logic of appearances" (96) in which events can be understood simply as random, as if they "just happen" (Scott, 2014: 15).

In summary, although most audiences in all three countries validated the powerful sense of en-countering with "real" refugees in virtually "real" shots, a sense which was established by the unique

affordances of VR, the new immersive medium inherently trivializes realities. This is attributable to the fact that the audience is anaesthetized by their fascination with a "high adrenaline" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 128) hyperreality and immersive experience, bathing in simplistic media content without a broader frame for its structural comprehension and contextualization about the society and politics. As a result, Western and Chinese participants unanimously concentrated on the self-pleasure of the VR experience at the heart of their moral action, which constructs pleasurable and fleeting forms of ironic consumerism (Chouliaraki, 2013; Scott, 2015).

5.6.2 Distance: improper distance

In a 360° computer-generated environment, although the participant was able to (virtually) sit around the same refugee tent with distant refugees, the zero or too close distance eventually destroys the "proper distance" (Silverstone, 2007) that is believed to be able to successfully appeal for the distant humanitarian action of audiences. This is because VR simply urges the audience to merge with the refugee's lifeworld, thereby establishing a shared identity, while utterly erasing another essential prerequisite for the concept of proper distance: difference. For example, according to the following focus group extract:

> (FG5) The immersion had the amazing capability to immerse the viewer from an
> observer at first to an uncomfortable narrative participant. Incredible! It was as if I
> was transported there. I seem to be one of them . . . We waited for the emergency
> food airdrops together (female, Germany).

The above excerpt illustrates how the sense of absolute proximity caused participants to neglect the fact that refugees are biopolitical figures within the framework of global inequality of political economy, thus obfuscating the difference between them and refugees generated by power asymmetries. This is partly attributed to VR's obsessive pursuit of first-person storytelling in which VR

audiences could fully occupy the point of view of refugees at the expense of dispossessing the voice of the vulnerable others. In this sense, the refugees are ultimately excluded from the "space of the political" (Nyers, 2010: 130), where refugees' voices can have the capacity of speech to articulate notions of justice and injustice, about politics and their predicament, and to assert themselves as "visible and audible political subjects" (Stavinoha, 2019: 1227).

Another risk of absolute proximity is the reemergence of the notorious practice of "shock effect" (Benthall, 2010) in early humanitarian communication, because the participant is immersed in all directions in the "raw realism" and "plain reality" (Chouliaraki, 2013: 58) of suffering and the "bare life" (Agamben, 1998) of faraway strangers. This has ultimately led to the fetishization with the body in an extreme state of starvation that serves to "mobilize a pornographic spectatorial imagination between disgust and desire" (Chouliaraki, 2013: 58) among participants. When talking about the scene in which the masses of children rush toward the participant in "Clouds Over Sidra," for instance, an interviewee said,

> (FG3) I couldn't help but want to touch the heads of these refugee kids as they ran around me . . . I was filled with guilt when I looked into the eyes of these poor children with dark skin . . . I'm not sure how I can assist them, and I don't know what happened to them (female, China).

As this quote shows, the form of responsibility triggered by a sense of guilt enables a vague awareness of the plight of refugees but encourages no critical reflections on the causative relation of the conditions of this suffering. Rather, these refugee children were inevitably dehumanized as "ideal victims" (Höijer, 2004) fully reliant on "our" emergency aid or rescue operations to survive. It is precisely this social relationship anchored in the paternalistic gaze that Silverstone (2002: 283) refers to as the "immorality of distance," in which the audiences are fully sovereign in their agency over the "passive, unaware, quasi-human" (Chouliaraki, 2013: 58) sufferer.

The third risk is that the sense of absolute proximity makes the audience completely inhabit the suffering zone, thus losing the sense of "mobility" (Chouliaraki, 2006). The latter is often considered a key constituent of a cosmopolitan disposition, as it helps to "create an awareness of interdependence, encouraging the development of a notion of 'panhumanity,' combining a universalistic conception of human rights with a cosmopolitan awareness of difference" (Szerszynski and Urry, 2006: 117–118). Notably, in comparison to attempting to eliminate the virtually spatial distance by the use of immersive technology – albeit one-sidedly and dangerously – VR is practically worthless at bridging sociocultural and moral distance, because VR does not lead to a lower prioritization of events closer to home. There was substantial evidence in our data corpus that such communitarianism is widespread among Western and non-Western audiences, although such comments were more frequently made in interviews than in the focus groups.

> (Interviewee 11) Actually, the terrorist attacks in Berlin or London may be my biggest concern (male, Germany).

> (FG3) Many domestic problems . . . left-behind children, rural migrants, and poverty . . . all need to be resolved urgently. We have too many people living below the poverty line. Caring for compatriots is at the top of my ranking of values (male, China).

The first quotation above represents the logic of shared "Western culture" (Huiberts, 2019: 11) in which Western participants tend to prefer more comfortable, "self-affirming interactions" (Scott, 2015) with others close to their communitarian community. The second quotation helps to demonstrate a striking mis-match between powerless victims and the incapable benefactor, which appeared in most conversations between Chinese participants, and was the most agreed upon, suggesting that domestic problems are the highest priority. In this case, the Western participants in the UK and Germany who mobilize the proximity of Western culture, as well as the Chinese participants who mobilize domestic population politics, all inhabited an ironic, isolated communitarian

129

environment and public realm that oriented themselves toward their own communitarian concerns rather than cultivating cosmopolitan sensibilities toward distant refugees (Chouliaraki, 2013; Huiberts, 2019; Scott, 2015).

In summary, the specific absolute proximity of VR may result in three risks that diverge from a cosmopolitan consciousness: (1) the political demands of the victims were marginalized; (2) the victims were fetishized in a dehumanized way; (3) the communitarian disposition or a more bound sense of belonging was maintained.

5.6.3 Hierarchies of human life: depoliticized sentimentalism

As discussed, VR can help the audience to more easily empathize with distant suffering, particularly among female participants. The references to affective terms in the quotations below, for example, were symptomatic of the frequent emotional, tender-hearted responses to the visualities and narratives that were depicting distressed refugee women along with their starving and malnourished children in the refugee camps.

> (FG1) It touched me very much . . . I am so emotional, without words (female, UK).

> (FG6) So sad, so full of hope . . . I'm without words . . . I want to donate (female, Germany).

> (FG4) I couldn't stop weeping when I saw those kids just now . . . I'm at a loss for words. I hope they are all safe (female, China).

Indeed, these quotations composed of words such as "touched" and "weeping" constitute a traditional paradigm of "pure sentimentalism" (Chouliaraki, 2008) or "indulgent sentimentality" (Kyriakidou, 2015) in humanitarian communication. However, in the results we more importantly find

that sentimentalist audiences tend to push aside analysis of the sociohistorical origins or contemporary political and economic causes of these conflicts, crises and emergencies. In these particular quotations, the behavior of putting aside is supported by a phrase pattern of "I'm without words," which gestures a tremendous empathy toward the distant suffering. Consequently, the participant prefers to establish sentimental bonds and charitable emotions with distant suffering through voluntary monetary donations, mercy, and benevolence.

However, the pure sentimentalism easily suffocates fruitful action by using overly moderate methods, and by turning to superficial, impulsive, and transient morality, aimed at producing fleeting moments of emotion, which presents an overly simplistic view of sufferers and their plight (Cohen, 2001). This is what Kurasawa (2013) calls "sentimentalist depoliticization" which skirts over the political factors and socioeconomic mechanisms underpinning these crises, sustaining an apolitical and individualist conception of humanitarianism, and a "short-lived" or momentary activism. These findings, at least, empirically prove the more critically pessimistic hypothesis that VR takes the audience's personally empathic feelings as the focus of intervention, rather than structural inequality and political exclusion (Nash, 2018). In other words, VR as an "ultimate empathy machine" with powerful response-ability is a limited proposition, which generalizes a narrow vision of moral response and humanitarian communication.

What is more, such depoliticized sentimentalism or apolitical benevolence not only fails to provide vast possibilities for the more egalitarian reaction toward vulnerable refugees, but also (re)consolidates or maintains the asymmetry of power between the safety and well-being of viewers and the vulnerability of sufferers. For example, the following quotations prove that while Western and Chinese participants adopted different sociocultural scripts, they uniformly maintained a clear but highly problematic negative/positive dichotomy between themselves and refugees.

(FG2) I cried watching the VR . . . well, how lucky we are! (female, UK).

(FG3) It was really upsetting and sorrowful . . . I have to say that being born in such a thriving and prosperous China is the most supreme stroke of luck (female, China).

As is visible in the above quotes, the originally ethical and political encounter between participants and distant refugees is grossly oversimplified to a post-humanitarian self-indulgent narcissism (Chouliaraki, 2013) in which the participant fatalistically constructs herself/himself as a "lucky" person. What this narcissistic sensibility fails to recognize is that the public circulation of emotion is inscribed in systematic patterns of global inequality and their hierarchies of place and human life. In this sense, the findings empirically highlight and verify Irom's (2018) argument that VR itself remains a social and cultural product, as well as being subject to the constraints of ideology and power hierarchies that permeate other medium and technologies.

In summary, the prominence of VR technology has an ability to enhance empathy toward the characters and emotional engagement (Kukkakorpi and Pantti, 2020; Sánchez Laws, 2017). Female participants, our research has also confirmed, tend to engage with distant suffering in emotional terms more intensely than male participants, as has been found in previous studies (Höijer, 2004; Huiberts and Joye, 2019; Scott, 2014). However, the depoliticized sentimentalism reworks the colonial legacies of humanitarianism while it also obfuscates complex asymmetries of power and structural political exclusion.

5.7 Discussion and conclusion

At the outset of this study, it was discussed how the paradoxical capability of VR in cultivating a cosmopolitan engagement with distant suffering exists between techno-utopian and techno-dystopian narratives. First, VR relies on the notions of presence and storyliving to implicitly link audiences spatially and temporally to distant suffering, creating global connectivity and reducing perceived distances between audiences and others; yet it also enables audiences to fully occupy the

point of view of distant sufferers, which may destroy the proper distance. Second, VR simulates a superficially "real" encounter for visual intimacy; yet in this case the mediated hyperreality is not an authentic reality, and its simulation does not fill the gap between reality and the virtual world. Third, VR enables an audience to experience virtually fundamental "freedom," epitomizing an attitude of cultural relativism that informs a great deal of contemporary multiculturalism, providing vast possibilities for a more egalitarian representation of distant sufferers; yet it also takes the spectator's personally empathic feelings as the focus of intervention, rather than structural inequality and political exclusion.

Drawing on focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, there is little empirical evidence to substantiate the initially posed techno-optimistic promises of developing a cosmopolitan public. Rather, the findings support the more pessimistic hypotheses of some earlier studies where a form of ironic consumerism, a communitarian logic and bond, and an apolitical pure sentimentalism are found. The results of this research suggest that although VR stimulates emotional donations and (fleeting) moral awareness, the moral simple-mindedness and lack of economic and political critiques identified by previous studies remains a prominent feature of audiences' encounters with faraway refugees through immersive VR. At least, it became clear that what matters most in terms of VR's role in fostering a cosmopolitan consciousness is not necessarily the unique properties of the progressive technology.

Our focus groups and individual interviews relied on small-scale volunteers for participation and used a snowball sampling technique, and social desirability bias was still present in group discussions; as a consequence, our findings have little or no generalizability. However, by using multiple data sources, our research findings echo the same dynamic and logic of sociodemographic variables in engaging with distant suffering as articulated in recurrent sociological and psychological studies on age and gender (e.g., Höijer, 2004; Huiberts and Joye, 2019; Kyriakidou, 2015, 2021; Scott, 2014, 2015). For example, emotional responses and pure sentimentalism were more prominent in

the focus groups and interviews with female participants, which has also confirmed gendered socialization processes (Campbell and Winters, 2008). Young male participants draw their attention more intensely to the quality of the immersive experience, thus decontextualizing the structural causes of suffering and making them apolitical. In addition, our crossnational comparative perspectives have also helped to probe how participants mobilize different sociocultural capital and "local and national frameworks" (Kyriakidou, 2021: 98) to respond to suffering. Surprisingly, albeit in a non-exhaustive or mutually exclusive way, we have discovered the result-oriented commensurability and resemblance between different participants characterized by different political structures and sociocultural experiences.

This is significant for the study of digital cosmopolitanism in the context of the platformization of humanitarian communication (Scott, 2015; Zuckerman, 2013), not just because it dramatically opens up the scope of the medium and technologies, or advances the turn of digitalization in studies of media and morality in the polymedia milieu. Of central importance is that the article has deconstructed the myth of a technological utopianism that believes that the immensely powerful VR technology can inevitably lead to a more moral and egalitarian world. At least, until now, VR may help to advance a technocratic solutionism, in which global inequities, poverty and power asymmetries are constructed as a purely technical problem rather than as an issue concerning the broader structural drivers of economic and political divisions.

Of course, VR should not be underestimated merely as a bugaboo of an alarmist philosophical and fictional dystopia because, if it goes beyond the goal of the "ultimate empathy machine" and addresses ethical concerns, it has the potential to play a key role in future humanitarian practice and communication (Sánchez Laws, 2017). Yet let us pause for a moment to remind ourselves that dominant mediators of development issues, such as humanitarian news organizations and aid agencies, should not rely entirely on the particular affordances of VR to gain a moral bond with the distant refugee crisis. It is conceivable that in the ultimate empathy engines that are highly praised

134

by techno-utopianism, the audience may turn into the puppets that are controlled using wires or strings, or even the Cartesian brain-in-a-vatism of the movie The Matrix, and may eventually become vassals of "hegemonic humanitarianism" (Irom, 2018: 4387).

This is a timely reminder that we must tread cautiously with the incorporation of VR in humanitarian communication. Particularly, it is so far uncertain in what ways and to what extent the VR technology will expand in the years to come, especially since Mark Elliot Zuckerberg, the CEO of the technology giant Meta Platforms (formerly named Facebook), ambitiously announced the blueprint for the development of the "Metaverse," an integrated network of 360° virtual worlds that constitutes a compelling alternative realm for human sociocultural interaction. As humanitarian communication scholars, we believe that critically and constructively studying the possible implications (or risks) of VR in humanitarian communication is a necessary task of research, even before it is widely adopted in societies.

Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT) statement

In this article, Zhe Xu holds the responsibility of being the first author, and additionally, the corresponding author. Due to the complexity of the experimental operation, Mengrong Zhang assisted in the process of data collection and data analysis. Conceptualization: Zhe Xu; Methodology: Zhe Xu; Data collection: Zhe Xu & Mengrong Zhang; Analysis (coding): Zhe Xu & Mengrong Zhang; Writing (original draft): Zhe Xu; Writing (review and editing): Zhe Xu; Visualization: Zhe Xu.

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A
Summary of chapters

Article 1/Chapter 2

This article is a much-needed contribution to the "de-Westernization" of the field by empirically exploring the role of government-controlled media in mediating distant suffering. The empirical study focuses on a single but illustrative Chinese television news documentary about the "European refugee crisis" and adopts a text-analytical approach using Lilie Chouliaraki's "analytics of mediation." This analysis is combined with a focus group study that exposes 81 respondents to the news documentary. Both sets of findings suggest that while the Chinese authoritarian television coverage provides audiences with relatively intense mediated experiences of humanized distant suffering, it still carries highly cultural and political orientations. As a result, the government-controlled media fails to foster cosmopolitan dispositions in the sense of making audiences more hospitable and reflexive, instead consolidating national discourse and identity politics.

Article 2/Chapter 3

This article begins to ameliorate this gap in knowledge by examining how Chinese audiences legitimize their unresponsiveness to mediated victims of global disasters. Drawing upon data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups with participants (N = 81), the study discusses the dominant regimes of justification which inform audience inactivity, the associated argumentation strategies and patterns of reasoning, and their sociocultural and ideological underpinnings. We find that decision-making about the moral justification for inactivity is influenced by state-propaganda

media narratives, preferences for ideologies, perceptions of national identity and global responsibility, and geopolitical imaginations. These findings have mplications for expanding the ontological horizons of distant suffering studies that are currently embedded in Western spatial and ideological dimensions, particularly in a world of crises spawned by globalisation and mediatisation.

Article 3/Chapter 4

Prevailing humanitarian communication scholarship has limited itself to surveying the vulnerability of the global South as visualized by Western media. This article takes a step towards ameliorating the resulting gap in knowledge by comparing how the news media in authoritarian regimes and Western democracies visually frame the Afghanistan and Ukraine refugee crises. Analyzing photo-journalism data that covers twelve leading professional media outlets in the US, the UK, and China (N = 2,572), the study first identifies frames embedded in the news visuals and then assesses the prevalence of these frames. The study finds that the way humanitarian crises are visualized in the media was significantly influenced by journalism culture across media systems and the geographical origins of suffering. The findings suggest that the UK and US media upheld the underlying post-humanitarianism stance, while Chinese authoritarian media coverage exemplified the geopoliticization of humanitarian emergencies, with both approaches having dehumanizing implications.

Article 4/Chapter 5

This article aims to deconstruct the myth of technological utopianism which contends that immersive virtual reality (VR) can inevitably lead to a more moral and egalitarian world due to its promises of copresence, immediacy and transcendence in humanitarian communication. The question we explore is whether existing VR artifacts, as exemplars of the "ultimate empathy machine," construct a technocratic solutionism which becomes constitutive of humanitarian crises themselves. Drawing upon empirical material from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with VR audiences in China, Germany, and the UK, the findings show that VR may easily construct a de- politicized hyperreality of intense spectacularity and trap audiences within an improper distance, thereby re-working the colonial legacies of humanitarianism while also obfuscating complex asymmetries of power and structural political exclusion. These findings have important implications for reminding humanitarian news organizations and aid agencies that they should not rely entirely on the particular affordances of VR to gain a moral bond with the distant refugee crisis.