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The Role of Digital Images in Migration Management: “One Picture a Thousand Stories”



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Abstract

This study examines the representation of refugees in Türkiye’s visual migration management. It conducts a content analysis of 44 photographs and a social semiotic analysis of three selected photographs from the e-catalog “One Picture a Thousand Stories” published on the official website of the Presidency of Migration Management. This digital catalog comprises 44 photographs submitted to a photography competition organized by the Presidency of Migration Management in 2021, which were subsequently selected for publication based on their thematic relevance and visual representation of migration-related narratives. The initial review of the photos focuses on analyzing the depiction of refugees with particular attention to their representation and interactions with various social actors, including local communities and state representatives such as law enforcement and government officials. This study examines the role of visual narratives in Türkiye’s migration governance and how migration-related imagery contributes to state-led discourse on refugee management. Considering the significant impact of visual communication on shaping public perceptions of political issues, government institutions have increasingly incorporated photographs on their websites and social media platforms to convey strategic messages. Additionally, this study examines the broader role of photography in migration management with a particular focus on its influence in shaping public perceptions of the “acceptable” migrant within the context of state policies and social integration.

Keywords

Migration management · social semiotic · content analysis · policy discourse



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The Role of Digital Images in Migration Management: “One Picture a Thousand Stories”

The internet, social media, and widely accessible digital technologies have significantly transformed the role and impact of photographs. These improvements have facilitated the creation and dissemination of photographs, thereby increasing the influence of visual media in shaping perceptions and representations (Massari, 2023, p. 4). Social and digital media have increased the global visibility of refugee experiences through a diverse range of photographs. These photographs depict scenes ranging from distress and loss to moments of relief and joy, capturing refugees as they cross borders, seek shelter, or reunite with loved ones (de Laat, 2018, p. 16). Photographs function as a form of visual documentation that provides insight into times and places that might otherwise remain obscured, while also emphasizing details that may otherwise be overlooked. Photographers deliver their perspectives through intentional choices, including the selection of the shot's location, the arrangement of the subject, and the use of lighting. These decisions influence how viewers interpret the intended message of the photograph. While historically significant actors in the traditional public sphere, state institutions continue to play a crucial role in the contemporary digital communications landscape (Massari, 2023). Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen (2020) emphasize the significant political impact of photographic imagery in their analysis of visual representation within international politics.

Their analysis centers on the widely circulated photograph of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian child who tragically drowned while attempting to reach Europe as part of a perilous refugee journey. The photo, which shows his lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach, became an iconic symbol of the human cost of the Syrian refugee crisis and attracted global attention to the desperate plight of displaced persons seeking asylum in Europe. This photograph played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, generating widespread support for Europe's open-door migration policy in 2015. However, as political dynamics shifted, the same photograph was later used to justify the 2016 EU-Türkiye agreement, which significantly restricted migration routes from Türkiye to Greece. This case highlights the influential role of visual media in shaping public discourse on migration and informing policy decisions. The fields of migration governance (Poljak, 2018; Carmel et al., 2021; Mayblin, 2021; Natter, 2021) and the visual representation of refugees (Williams, 2003; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017) have been extensively examined in academic research. There has been a marked increase in scholarly attention to the role of photographic imagery within the context of migration governance recently (Wilmott, 2017; Massari, 2023). Studies on the visual representation of migration have emphasized the media's critical role in influencing public perceptions, shaping policy discourse, and constructing state narratives. Visual framing functions as a key mechanism through which migration is depicted, commonly either as a humanitarian crisis or a security threat, under prevailing political ideologies. Brader et al. (2008) underlined the influence of elite discourse in shaping opposition to immigration by emphasizing its costs rather than benefits, frequently evoking anxiety through racial or ethnic distinctions. Similarly, Dunaway et al. (2007) argue that media coverage strengthens the prominence of migration-related issues, thereby reinforcing prevailing narratives. The credibility of visual representations is increasingly questioned in the digital age. Allan (2019) observed that the “authority of news imagery” is frequently challenged due to manipulation and selective framing, raising concerns about the reliability of visual narratives.



Blinder and Allen (2016) analyzed the representation of migration in British news media between 2010 and 2012, demonstrating how journalistic narratives selectively emphasize asylum seekers, irregular migration, and economic migrants while rendering other migrant groups largely invisible. This selective framing shapes public perceptions that frequently misalign with statistical realities, reinforcing misconceptions and contributing to the development of restrictive immigration policies. The study further examines the impact of metaphorical language, such as characterizing immigration as a “flood,” in shaping policy responses by framing migration as a security threat. Media narratives can affect social integration by marginalizing migrant communities and reinforcing exclusionary attitudes beyond influencing public opinion. Although the study focuses on the UK, its findings shows that similar media-driven patterns exist in other countries, highlighting the broader role of the media in shaping migration discourse and policy.

Caple and Knox (2015) identified a shift toward visual storytelling in which photographs not only shape public discourse but, in some cases, become the focal point of the narrative. They further emphasize the evolving role of online news galleries as an emerging storytelling medium that, while influenced by traditional newspaper reporting practices, facilitates the development of distinct genres (Caple & Knox, 2012, p. 233). Their analysis reveals that online galleries are particularly well-suited for soft news and human-interest stories, rather than hard news reporting, which typically requires greater depth and further investigation. Moreover, the interaction between text and photographs, particularly the role of captions in shaping meaning, remains an area of interest. The authors also highlight the increasing significance of ‘text complexes’ - integrating written narratives, photograph galleries, and videos—within digital news platforms. Aiello (2020, p. 60) emphasizes the significance of analyzing the formal characteristics of data visualizations to understand their role in shaping the interpretation of knowledge, facts, and perspectives. A social semiotic approach provides a structured framework for examining semiotic resources — including color, layout, graphs, and charts —by linking their design to broader societal meanings and contextual implications. This approach emphasizes how data visualizations function in practice and how they are refined to achieve more effective and ethical communication rather than merely describing visual materials. Researchers can contribute to the evolution of its production and application in everyday life through the systematic cataloging and contextualization of these visual elements provided they critically engage with both the political and practical dimensions of data visualization.

From a theoretical standpoint, Foucault’s (1982) concepts of “governmentality” and “biopower” provide a critical framework for analyzing how states employ visual media to construct migration narratives that serve political objectives. These photographs function as ideological instruments that shape public perception and influence policymaking, rather than merely serving as documentary representations. Harrison (2003) argues that photographs serve as potent communicative tools, embedding cultural, social, and political meanings. The strategic sharing of images on government platforms, in the context of Türkiye’s migration governance, simultaneously reinforces both a humanitarian narrative and a discourse of control highlighting the role of the state in regulating migration. This study explores the visual representation of migration governance as depicted by Türkiye’s Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), the primary state institution overseeing migration-related policies and operations. Employing a visual content analysis approach informed by visual social semiotics, the research examines 44 photographs. These photographs were selected from the “One Picture A Thousand Stories” photography contest organized by the PMM in 2021 and featured in an e-catalog of images deemed worthy of exhibition¹. The photographs seem to be strategically

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curated to depict migration in a manner that aligns with Türkiye’s migration management policies, international perspectives on migration, and the country’s emphasis on humanitarian aid. This analysis centers on five key themes: Türkiye’s role in shaping migration discourse, the humanization and aestheticization of migrant imagery, the country’s international positioning in migration management, the representation of migrants as either victims or resilient individuals, and the intersection of migration with Türkiye’s national identity. The photographs are strategically framed to redefine Türkiye’s role in international migration governance by highlighting the themes of hospitality, humanitarian responsibility, and social solidarity. These photographs shared by a country hosting the largest refugee² population in the world³ have two purposes: They seek to create a favorable perception of refugees among the local population domestically while they show Türkiye’s humanitarian initiatives and advocate for a collective approach to migration management internationally. A common characteristic of migration photography is the use of remarkable and powerful imagery to highlight the human dimensions of migration crises.

The PMM’s photo catalog adopts a visual strategy that juxtaposes representations of hardship with photographs of hope, resilience, and social integration. This approach moves beyond the victim narrative by portraying refugees as active participants in society, engaging in employment, education, and daily interactions with local communities. Additionally, the incorporation of traditional motifs and cultural elements reinforces the themes of integration and social cohesion, framing migration as an opportunity for solidarity rather than exclusively as a crisis. As Berger (1980) notes, photographs are inherently selective, capturing specific moments representing both visible realities and underlying narratives, ultimately shaping interpretation through their framing. The photographs curated by the PMM function as both visual documentation and ideological instruments. These photographs reinforce the portrayal of migration as a structured and controlled process by integrating migration management within the context of Türkiye’s cultural identity and humanitarian tradition. Furthermore, they position Türkiye as a “model country” in migration governance, underlining its leadership within the framework of EU-Türkiye agreements and broader regional strategies. However, this visual narrative has certain risks. While the emphasis on solidarity and integration is significant, the use of refugee imagery to advance national and international agendas raises ethical concerns. It is crucial to balance the representation of migrants’ experiences with the perspectives of host communities to ensure that such portrayals promote authentic understanding and meaningful support. The PMM’s photographic collection thus underscores both the possibilities and challenges of using visual materials in migration governance. This study offers valuable insights into the visual construction and communication of migration at both national and global levels by critically examining the human, esthetic, and political dimensions of these photographs.

Methodology

Scott (2024, p. 234) claims that “migration is visually constructed through conventions formed at abstract and material levels of society.” This perspective underlines the necessity of critically examining

²While this study employs the term “refugee” as an umbrella concept to refer to individuals from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Somalia residing in Türkiye, it is essential to acknowledge the specific legal definitions established in Türkiye’s national legislation. According to the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), the status of refugee is granted exclusively to individuals who arrive from European countries and meet the criteria outlined in the 1951 Geneva Convention. In contrast, individuals from non-European countries are defined as conditional refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, or individuals under temporary protection, as is the case for most Syrians. Despite these distinctions in Turkish immigration law, the term “refugee” in this study has a broader sociological meaning, emphasizing shared experiences of displacement, forced migration, and seeking protection rather than just legal status.

³Colombia, Germany, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Türkiye and Uganda hosted almost one-third of the world’s refugees and other people in need of international protection. See also: Refugee Statistics 2024, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>



the visual representation of migration in media and public discourse to uncover the underlying narratives and ideological frameworks shaping public perceptions. This study adopts a methodological framework that integrates visual content analysis with social semiotic analysis to investigate the visual strategies employed by government institutions in migration management. These approaches enable the systematic categorization of visual materials and the interpretation of their deeper semiotic meanings, providing valuable insights into how such representations shape the public understanding of migration. A visual content analysis was conducted on a dataset of 44 photographs from an e-catalog published by PMM. According to Bell (2001), visual content analysis provides a systematic method for quantifying and categorizing visual media, thus facilitating the identification of recurring patterns in the portrayal of individuals, events, and situations. In this study, the quantitative component serves as a descriptive tool that illuminates pervasive visual conventions and guides the selection of photographs for further qualitative interpretation. The social semiotic analysis integrates both quantitative methods and in-depth interpretative strategies. Specifically, this descriptive phase is designed to explain common visual conventions and to inform the selection of photographs for comprehensive analysis. The analysis primarily focuses on representational and interpersonal meta-functions to determine the most frequently depicted elements and understand how images are situated relative to viewers (Scott, 2024, p. 189).

The analysis begins with the systematic coding of each photograph using a framework informed by the social semiotic theories of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). This framework is further refined inductively through a preliminary review of the dataset, following Hall's (1975) interpretive approach. Twelve coding categories were developed, including the stage of migration (pre-journey, journey, settlement, post-settlement), number of migrants in the frame, children present in the frame, action represented by migrant, reaction represented by migrant, border wall represented, action by other represented participants, the environment of photographs (outside/inside), the authority figure in a frame, image act and gaze, social distance, and vertical perspective to capture key aspects of visual representation. The quantitative analysis of these categories serves as a foundational step in identifying patterns in the representation of migrants and migration-related themes. This phase involves the systematic cataloging of key visual elements, such as the presence of authority figures, the social distance between subjects, and the environmental context, with the aim of identifying recurring visual tropes and dominant representational strategies. Following the quantitative analysis, three award-winning photographs from the e-catalog were selected for in-depth interpretative analysis. These photographs were chosen based on their prominence in the competition and their representational significance within the broader dataset. The photographers provided informed consent for the photos included in the study. This consent ensured adherence to ethical research standards concerning the use of visual materials.

The qualitative phase involved a detailed examination of key visual elements, including the composition and arrangement of subjects, gaze dynamics, and the interaction between foreground and background elements. This analysis aimed to uncover the narratives and ideological messages embedded within the photographs. The analysis examined key variables such as group size, foreground objects, and background contrasts, along with thematic elements including resilience, displacement, and urban inequality. The analysis focused on the postures and facial expressions of family members to assess how migration resilience was visually conveyed. It also examined the contrasts between informal shelters and urban infrastructure to illuminate the underlying socioeconomic disparities. The analysis interpreted symbolic elements such as pathways and trains as representations of movement and hope, illustrating how visual motifs interact with and contribute to broader migration narratives. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive

examination of how visual elements are used to construct migration narratives by integrating quantitative content analysis with qualitative social semiotic analysis. The findings of the research provide valuable insights into the strategies employed by government institutions to frame migration, with an emphasis on the themes of resilience, integration, and national identity. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual materials reflect and actively shape societal perceptions of migration through qualitative analysis.

Findings and Discussions

Descriptive Statistics of the Data

The analysis uncovered numerous visual conventions that contributed to the construction of migration narratives in Türkiye. In terms of representational content, 95% of the photographs prominently depict migrants as central subjects. Two photographs did not visibly depict individuals: One captured a caravan of buses and ambulances evacuating people from a city devastated by destruction with the elevated perspective obscuring the passengers inside. The other photograph, also taken from above, depicted a tent camp located across the border. These results indicate that nearly all photographs included representations of migrants. The migrants were also present even in photographs where law enforcement officers or PMM personnel were the focal subjects. Some photographs depicted migration through representations of migration routes or temporary accommodation centers rather than individuals. Photographs of migration routes and temporary shelters carry significant representational and interpretative weight as enduring symbols closely associated with migration.

The majority of migrant subjects were depicted in groups of three or more individuals, accounting for 56.82% of the photographs (twenty-five photographs), three of which specifically portrayed families. A single migrant was featured in 10 photographs (22.73%), while pairs of migrants were represented in seven photographs (15.91%), "reflecting a visual emphasis on community over individuality" (Dellas, 2020, p. 37). The dataset of paired photographs includes seven photographs categorized as follows: One depicting two girls, one featuring a boy and a girl, two depicting two boys, two capturing a mother and child, and one illustrating an interaction between a teacher and a student. Additionally, two photographs (4.55%) did not depict any individuals; one showed a refugee camp while the other presented vehicles on a migration route, captured from an aerial perspective.

Thirty-one photographs (70.45%) feature children, whereas 13 photographs exclude any children. The representations of the settlement phase vary depicting scenes such as families residing in temporary shelters, children studying or playing in the streets, migrants sitting alone at home, young migrants socializing in domestic settings, individuals playing music in a café or outdoors, migrants walking through urban spaces, and a wrestling match taking place on a beach.

The photographs portray a wide array of experiences across various stages of displacement within the broader context of migration. Five photographs (11.36%) capture the journey to Türkiye, while one photograph (2.27%) documents the migration route from Aleppo to another destination. The largest portion of the collection, comprising 24 photographs (54.55%), portrays refugee settlements within Türkiye, emphasizing the predominant trend of long-term resettlement in the country. Additionally, two photographs (4.55%) depict settlements in other countries: One shows a tent settlement in Atme village on the Türkiye Syria border, while the other features a tent settlement within Syria. The migration journey from Türkiye to Europe is represented in 11 photographs (25%), illustrating the continued movement toward European destinations.

Finally, one photograph (2.27%) captured the pre-settlement phase, documenting the period before the final relocation. The photograph is classified as representing the pre-settlement phase depicting a Turkish soldier offering chocolate to a Syrian girl in Tel Abyad. However, neither the photograph nor its accompanying description provides clear evidence of the girl’s intent to migrate. Due to the ongoing conflict in her country and inclusion in a photograph featured in a migration-themed competition, she is considered a potential refugee. These photographs construct a visual narrative of the diverse trajectories and decisions faced by displaced individuals throughout their migration journeys. One depiction of the journey from Türkiye to Europe illustrates migrants attempting to cross the Meriç River by boat. Additionally, two other attempts to migrate from Türkiye to Europe were unsuccessful, with the individuals being rescued during their crossings.

Thirty-six photographs (81.81%) depict migrants in outdoor environments, highlighting the emphasis on border crossings, waiting areas, and informal living conditions under open skies. One photograph contains both indoor and outdoor elements, with an interior scene captured from an external angle blurring the line between public visibility and private experience. One of the indoor photographs shows a moment in a café that gives the impression of a temporary shelter, while the others, taken largely in accommodation centers, illustrate controlled and often restricted spaces of residence. Moreover, three nighttime photographs show individuals near the Edirne border attempting to keep warm by lighting a fire, visually emphasizing the themes of vulnerability, resilience, and survival. These spatial portrayals often juxtapose wide-open, uncontrolled outdoor spaces with the confinement of accommodation centers and controlled zones, producing a contrast that reinforces the narratives of humanitarianism and securitization (Massari, 2021, p. 122)

Authority figures appear in three photographs (6.81%) depicting various interactions between officials and migrants. These include two police officers carrying refugee children, a soldier offering chocolate to a Syrian girl, and a PMM staff member addressing a group of migrants assembled in Edirne to cross the border. These scenes reflect a broader visual strategy where law enforcement and military personnel are often portrayed in compassionate or protective roles, particularly in interactions with children, reinforcing humanitarian narratives while also legitimizing state control at borders.

From a formal semiotic perspective, a considerable proportion of the photographs were taken at a close distance between the subject and the photographer, representing 47.7% of the total, while 70.5% were captured from an eye-level perspective. Direct eye contact with the camera was observed in 13.6% of the photographs, whereas the majority depicted migrants looking downward or away from the frame. Notably, only the children made eye contact in the photos. This is consistent with the findings of Šarić (2022, p. 113), who observed that children in refugee photographs are more frequently shown making eye contact, functioning as “demand images” that emotionally engage the viewer through gaze, while adult subjects are often photographed from a distance or with diverted gazes, signaling vulnerability and detachment.

Qualitative analysis of the three winning photographs from the competition

While the analysis of photographs initially focused on identifying their content, a qualitative approach was later used to investigate the composition and arrangement of visual elements, emphasizing their positioning relative to the viewer. This qualitative analysis aimed to further refine the conceptualization of visual conventions through an in-depth examination of the top three photographs from the competition.

The winning photograph of the contest, taken by K. Deniz Kalaycı, presents a compelling urban scene that encapsulates the themes of migration and urbanization (PMM, 2022). In the foreground, a family of three—two adults and a child—is depicted with their backs turned, standing closely together, their identities and

faces obscured, leaving only their silhouettes visible. As Banks (2012, p.301) notes, refugees are “portrayed as shadowy strangers”. This photograph serves as a powerful representation of how refugees are frequently anonymized with their identities and narratives often overlooked. The family’s gaze toward an uncertain future underscores the symbolic representation of displacement, embodying the themes of lost hope and pervasive uncertainty. The adults, clad in dark, traditional clothes, carried bags, that identified them as newly arrived migrants. The child, holding the hand of one adult while grasping a small suitcase in the other, stands alongside them. Positioned on a paved road at the boundary of a grassy area, they direct their gaze toward a dense and expansive cityscape in the background. The mid-ground features a cluster of tightly packed, low-rise residential buildings with red-tiled roofs, reinforcing a sense of urban congestion. The tightly clustered homes create a sense of overwhelming density, emphasizing the crowded living conditions. The three imposing modern high-rise buildings dominate the skyline, creating a visual juxtaposition with the older, more compact residential areas. This contrast emphasizes the effects of rapid urbanization and the widening divide between traditional and contemporary living spaces. This visual juxtaposition aligns with Aiello’s (2020, p. 60) discourse that photographs in migration contexts often operate on multiple semiotic levels, both documenting reality and shaping public narratives through esthetic and ideological framing. The overcast sky casts a gray, somber tone over the scene, reinforcing an atmosphere of uncertainty and transition.

Figure 1

A family of three in İstanbul. Photograph by K. Deniz Kalaycı.



The photograph effectively captures the challenges associated with migration and the impact of urban expansion on cities such as İstanbul. This theme is further emphasized in the accompanying text, which states, “İstanbul is a city that receives migrants from all over the world. The mass migration is also affecting urbanization negatively.” The photograph serves as both a poignant narrative of migration and a purposeful tool of political and visual storytelling. The photograph depicts a migrant family moving toward a densely urbanized environment, encapsulating the themes of displacement, integration, and the complexities of migration-induced urban transformation. The family, carrying their belongings, symbolizes the migrant

journey from displacement to resettlement, while the urban landscape in the background highlights the socioeconomic disparities inherent in this transition. The strong visual contrast between modest apartment buildings and towering skyscrapers serves as a representation of broader urban inequalities, emphasizing the pressures migration places on urban infrastructure and city planning.

The winning of this photograph in the competition reflects a strategic application of “visual migration governance” in which carefully curated photographs are employed to influence public perceptions of migration. This approach reinforces the government’s narrative of humanitarian responsibility while asserting its control over migration processes. This photograph prompts viewers to reflect on both the resilience of migrants seeking integration and the broader societal challenges associated with their presence by juxtaposing the human dimension of migration with a prominently featured urban landscape. This balance between evoking empathy and highlighting infrastructural and policy considerations enables the government to position itself as a compassionate host while simultaneously underscoring the complexities of migration management. The photograph encapsulates both the aspirations and complexities of migration as a visual representation of policy themes. It presents Istanbul as a microcosm of global migration dynamics, a city that accommodates migrants from diverse backgrounds while contending with the pressures on housing and public services. The depiction of densely packed, modest housing reflects the lived experiences of many migrants, standing in stark contrast to the high-rise buildings, which symbolize both economic opportunity and structural inequality. This visual framing aligns with Türkiye’s broader migration narrative, positioning the country as a key actor in migration governance—one that actively supports integration while acknowledging the infrastructural and policy challenges it entails. The PMM conveys a broader message regarding migration’s influence on Türkiye’s urban and social landscapes by incorporating this photograph officially. The photograph humanizes migration by highlighting the personal experiences of migrants while also acknowledging the infrastructural and systemic challenges associated with rapid urbanization. These dual narratives frame migration not solely as a crisis but as a transformative societal process, reinforcing Türkiye’s evolving role as both a host country and a key player in global migration governance. The PMM, through this visual representation, asserts its authority in migration management while shaping public discourse to promote both awareness and support for its policies.

This photograph functions as a compelling medium for conveying migration narratives through visual social semiotics. It operates on multiple semiotic levels, employing representational, interactive, and compositional elements to illustrate the complexities of migration in Türkiye. The family walking together evokes themes of displacement, movement, and resilience in the foreground. Their modestly carried belongings symbolize both the hardships of migration and the potential for new beginnings. In the background, the urban landscape presents a stark contrast between densely packed, modest housing and modern high-rise buildings, serving as a visual metaphor for the socioeconomic inequalities inherent in urban migration processes. The juxtaposition of modest housing with towering skyscrapers conveys a dual message: It underscores the structural inequalities that migrants face upon arrival in urban areas while also symbolizing the prospects for integration and upward mobility. This photograph is particularly significant in Türkiye, which hosts one of the largest refugee populations globally. Cities like Istanbul, which have hosted significant migrant communities, exemplify the challenges of balancing opportunities for migrants with the strain on urban infrastructure and resources. The spatial composition of the photograph, which situates the family at the periphery of the cityscape, symbolizes the physical and social liminality of migrants in urban environments. Their placement on an unpaved path leading into the city emphasizes their precarious position between displacement and settlement. The application of visual social semiotics is essential for analyzing

how the photograph functions as a tool within the broader framework of visual migration governance. The PMM, which awarded this photograph in this competition, uses it as a narrative device to humanize migration while reinforcing its governance efforts. The depiction of the family in motion aligns with the broader institutional framing of migration as a transformative process, highlighting both the resilience of migrants and the responsibilities of the host society. The strong contrast within the urban landscape highlights the infrastructural challenges and socioeconomic disparities intensified by migration, reflecting the ongoing tension between inclusion and marginalization. The photograph strengthens Türkiye’s role as a key actor in global migration governance. It captures the dual reality of migration, portraying both the potential for integration and the concrete pressures placed on social and urban infrastructures. The family depicted in the photograph serves as a visual representation of the experiences of millions of migrants, while the urban backdrop symbolizes the broader socio-political framework of migration management in Türkiye. This interaction between human subjects and structural elements positions the photograph as both a powerful artistic composition and a strategic tool of state-led visual storytelling. The PMM strengthens its role in shaping public perceptions of migration, presenting it as both a challenge and an opportunity within the context of Türkiye’s evolving urban and social landscape by featuring this photograph.

The second place-winning photograph, taken by Murat Bakmaz, captures daily life within a refugee accommodation center, specifically the Midyat Accommodation Center (PMM, 2022). The photograph is shot from an elevated vantage point providing a bird’s-eye view of a vast expanse of beige, rectangular tents systematically arranged in uniform rows extending into the distance.

Figure 2

Life at Midyat Accomodation Center. Photograph by Murat Bakmaz.



The repetitive and uniform arrangement of the tents underlines the vast scale of displacement and the temporary nature of this living environment. A woman wearing a blue headscarf is seen hanging clothes on a makeshift clothesline stretched between two poles in the foreground. She holds up a pink and red patterned garment, introducing a contrast of color against the otherwise muted tones of the camp. The clothesline, filled with garments swaying in the breeze, serves as a visual representation of daily life and resilience

despite adversity. The ground appears dry and dusty, characteristic of conditions commonly found in refugee camps. The tents were decorated with logos from humanitarian organizations, signifying the collaborative efforts to provide shelter and support. Some tents feature makeshift doors or small extensions, which are likely added to enhance privacy.

The photograph emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of the residents as they create moments of normality within an otherwise precarious environment despite the challenging circumstances. The tightly packed arrangement of identical temporary shelters visually reinforces a sense of uniformity and structured migration management. The repetitive pattern of the tents symbolizes a coordinated and systematized approach to providing shelter, highlighting the state’s capacity to address the logistical complexities of accommodating displaced populations. In contrast, the foreground presents a humanizing element, providing a focal point that personalizes the otherwise vast and impersonal expanse of temporary dwellings. The woman’s activity in the photograph -engaging in laundry- serves as a symbolic representation of resilience, routine, and efforts to reestablish a sense of normality within an otherwise temporary and restrictive environment. Her presence within this setting underscores the lived experience of displacement while affirming the fundamental human dignity of refugees. The woman’s dress and the traditional patterns in the fabric she holds serve as a visual marker of her cultural identity and heritage. These elements show that despite the disruptions caused by forced migration, refugees maintain a connection to their cultural roots, which remain evident even within institutionalized settings. The presence of hanging laundry and everyday objects, such as rugs and makeshift doors, reflects the material precarity of the environment. However, these same objects also symbolize adaptability and self-sufficiency, highlighting the agency of displaced individuals in shaping their living spaces. The photograph avoids explicitly depicting suffering; instead, it offers a narrative of hardship and resilience structured around institutional support. The accompanying caption, “Life at Midyat Accommodation Center,” reduces the complexities of refugee experiences to a neutral and somewhat sanitized depiction. The title omits any reference to the underlying causes of displacement, or the systemic challenges faced by refugees, instead directing attention toward the accommodation center itself. This framing implicitly positions the facility as a testament to Türkiye’s role in providing structured care and security. Additionally, the institutional brand in the photograph, including visible logos and signboards, further reinforces this narrative. This photograph exemplifies Türkiye’s strategic use of visual migration management to influence public perceptions of its refugee policies. The photograph constructs a narrative centered on efficiency, humanitarian responsibility, and orderly migration governance by highlighting a well-organized accommodation center and capturing a moment of daily life. However, the visual framing of the photograph also hides certain underlying realities. The photograph normalizes prolonged displacement, presenting accommodation centers as adequate solutions while ignoring critical systemic issues such as integration, legal rights, and long-term resettlement by depicting an institutionalized environment. Additionally, the photograph disregards the root causes of displacement and the broader socio-political challenges associated with hosting millions of refugees, offering a constrained and carefully curated perspective on migration. The photograph also shifts attention away from the structural inequalities and the systemic dependencies that such environments inherently perpetuate by highlighting individual agency. This photograph operates within a deliberately constructed narrative framework that aligns with the dual objectives of migration management: Documenting state efforts while promoting a humane representation of refugees. This reflects Türkiye’s broader strategy of positioning itself as a responsible and capable actor in migration governance, benefiting from visual storytelling to emphasize its humanitarian commitments.

However, the absence of critical engagement with systemic challenges underscores the selective nature of the visual migration discourse, where what is presented is as significant as what remains omitted.

The third-place winning photograph, taken by İsmail Coşkun, captures a tense and emotionally charged moment in the migration process (PMM, 2022). The photo depicts a family of five cautiously crossing a shallow yet fast-moving section of the Meriç River near Edirne, Türkiye. Migrants who are likely trying to reach Greece are going through difficult and risky conditions on their journey to Europe. The family moves in a single line along a narrow, rocky path elevated just above the river, with the fast-flowing water rushing under them. The turbulent current generates white, frothy waves as it crashes against the rocks, intensifying the sense of danger. Everyone carefully navigates the narrow path, maintaining balance to prevent slipping. One man, presumably the father, carries a baby in his arms, while others carry bags and personal belongings wrapped in plastic bags for protection against moisture. They are dressed in dark, weather-appropriate clothes with hoods pulled up to shield themselves from the elements. The overcast sky and muted atmosphere create a cold and somber tone, symbolizing the family’s arduous journey and the uncertainty they endure. The vast expanse of calm water in the background contrasts sharply with the turbulent river in the foreground, symbolizing the challenges faced and the aspirations pursued during the migratory journey.

Figure 3

A family is walking through the Meriç River. Photograph by İsmail Coşkun.



Kress and Adami (2010, p. 185) claim that all media and communication technologies inherently possess affordances, encompassing both material and social possibilities as well as inherent constraints. They argue as Kress and Pachler (2007) stated, that identity and subjectivity are fundamentally shaped through the process of meaning-making to oneself and one’s lived experiences. Within this framework, the media encountered along with their affordances—what they facilitate, restrict, or prevent—significantly influence the construction of meaning and, consequently, the shaping of identities. This photograph depicts a moment of vulnerability as a group of migrants, including children, navigate shallow yet visibly dangerous waters. The photo emphasizes the themes of hardship, perseverance, and risk, highlighting the migrants’ resilience despite adversity. The composition centers on the human figures, while the surrounding environment,

including the flowing water and subtle indications of rapids, serves to frame and emphasize the unstable nature of their journey. This composition underlines the challenges that migrants encounter, highlighting both the physical and symbolic obstacles to their aspirations.

The act of crossing water serves as a powerful metaphor often associated with migration, symbolizing transition, struggle, and the search for a better future. The presence of a child reinforces the themes of fragility despite adversity and the strength of family ties. The light color palette, dominated by shades of gray and blue, creates a somber atmosphere that emphasizes the gravity of the migrants' situation. This visual approach aligns with the overarching narrative of migration as a significant humanitarian and political issue that requires attention. The caption of the photo also supports this perspective: “Migrants who go to Edirne with the hope of going to Europe are trying to cross to Greece with the difficult journey. “A family is walking through the shallow point of the Meriç River, which flows through the interior part of Edirne.” Phrases such as “difficult journeys” and “trying to cross to Greece with the hope of going to Europe” highlight both the challenges migrants endure and the aspirations that motivate their movement. These expressions reflect the physical and emotional toll of migration and highlight the migrants' enduring hope for a better future. At the same time, the narrative “emphasizes risk and a need for mechanisms to preserve health and life” drawing attention to the inherent dangers of such journeys and the urgent need for systems that can ensure migrants' safety and well-being throughout their passage (Greenwood & Thomson, 2020, p. 157). The photographer positions himself as an objective observer documenting the migration experience without overt intervention or judgment. The PMM presents itself as both an observer and administrator of migration, underlining its dual role in managing migration processes while addressing humanitarian concerns by documenting and disseminating this narrative. The interplay between text and photograph frames migration as a deeply human experience.

The depiction of a family in the photograph humanizes migration, shifting the focus from statistical representations to the lived experiences of migrants. While the caption of the photograph remains descriptive, its publication by a migration management authority situates it within the broader discourse on border control, migration policies, and humanitarian responses. The lack of a clear policy language allows the photograph to independently convey its message, subtly reaffirming the role of governance in migration management while encouraging empathy. This photograph and accompanying text are part of a broader strategy used by authorities in migration governance to balance competing narratives. On the one hand, the humanitarian perspective emphasizes the hardships faced by migrants, fostering public empathy and reinforcing the necessity of structured migration policies. On the other hand, the emphasis on control and surveillance is evident; by visually documenting and framing migration, the authority asserts its role and responsibility in overseeing and regulating migratory movements. The inclusion of this photograph agrees with international migration governance practices, where visual representations of border crossings serve multiple functions. This photograph evokes empathy from both domestic and international audiences and illustrates the challenges encountered by both migrants and authorities and reinforces the state's role in overseeing and managing migration processes. This photograph and its contextual framing contribute to a discourse that integrates humanitarian narratives with migration governance. It presents migration management as both a compassionate and authoritative effort by emphasizing the human dimension while simultaneously affirming the role of state oversight.

Visual representations of refugees are “both highly selective and profoundly political” and are shaped by governmental discourse and policy requirements (Bleiker et al., 2013, p. 411). These representations are rarely



objective; rather, they are strategically distributed to serve state interests—whether to elicit compassion in support of humanitarian agendas or to cultivate fear and justify restrictive immigration controls. Governments use visual images as a tool of biopolitical governance, framing asylum seekers as either passive victims in need of state intervention or potential threats to national security and social cohesion. This selective framing obscures the individuality, complexity, and agency of those seeking asylum, reducing them to abstract figures within broader narratives of state sovereignty, border protection, and national identity.

Conclusion

The visual portrayal of migration is instrumental in shaping public perceptions, informing policy decisions, and constructing political narratives. These representations often align with ideological and policy-driven discourses, influencing how migration is framed with its perceived advantages and challenges. Frequently associated with racial or ethnic identity, such framing can provoke public anxiety and significantly shape societal attitudes toward migration. Agenda-setting theory emphasizes the media’s capacity to focus public attention on specific issues, thereby reinforcing the importance of visual storytelling in shaping societal priorities. However, this influence has its complexities and limitations. The authenticity of photographs is increasingly scrutinized, particularly in an era marked by digital manipulation and growing skepticism toward media, thereby raising concerns about the reliability of visual narratives. Despite these challenges, the profound influence of visual materials in shaping public discourse and perceptions remains unquestionable. The rapid advancement of digital technologies has reshaped storytelling, elevating photographs from supplementary elements to the central components of modern narratives. Photographs, beyond their esthetic function, serve as powerful vehicles for transferring complicated cultural, social, and political meanings, profoundly shaping public perception and discourse. The strategic use of visual representation by the state further highlights its role as a governance instrument. Contemporary states employ visual strategies not only to depict migration as a broader societal concern but also to frame it at an individual level, reinforcing state authority and control. This dual role is particularly evident in migration governance, where carefully selected images serve to balance humanitarian narratives with state messages and influence both national and international perceptions of migration management.

The findings of this study emphasize the dual function of visual materials within Türkiye’s migration governance as they serve both humanitarian and political objectives. On the one hand, photographs evoke empathy by depicting refugees as individuals confronting adversity, emphasizing themes of resilience, displacement, and survival. These visual narratives humanize migration by focusing on personal struggles, family interactions, and moments of relief, reinforcing Türkiye’s portrayal as a humanitarian actor. On the other hand, these representations simultaneously serve as strategic instruments that reinforce state narratives of control, national identity, and institutional responsibility. The state frames migration as a managed process and presents itself as both a guardian of national interests and a provider of humanitarian aid through strategically selected photos. These visual representations convey the idea that migration is subject to strict control and reinforce the perception of state authority by depicting refugees within controlled settings, such as state-run camps, border checkpoints, and interactions with law enforcement. Furthermore, photographs that position migrants next to national symbols or official institutions contribute to a visual discourse that links migration governance with state sovereignty and national identity. These representations play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions by influencing whether migrants are perceived as vulnerable individuals in need of assistance, potential threats to social stability, or valuable contributors to the host society. The framing of migration has significant implications for policy development and social



attitudes as visual materials increasingly shape public discourse. The selective portrayal of refugees influences national and international perceptions that either promote solidarity and humanitarian engagement or reinforce exclusionary policies and xenophobic narratives. It is crucial to take a more balanced and ethically sound approach to visual storytelling considering the growing influence of digital platforms in disseminating migration-related images. The transition from politically motivated portrayals to representations that acknowledge the agency and complexity of migrant experiences encourages a more inclusive and nuanced discourse on migration.



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