Article

European Refugee Crisis or European Migration Crisis? How Words Matter in the News Framing (2015–2020) of Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Migrants

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Abstract: Asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are central concepts in news coverage of immigration. However, these three terms refer to distinct groups with different meanings and potentially different frames, which could be negative, victim-based, or positive. Additionally, it is uncertain to what extent these groups are given a voice and how this is linked to the news frames used. To address this, a content analysis of 503 articles about asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in a Belgian elite newspaper and a popular newspaper was conducted for the period from 2015 until 2020. We focus specifically on differences between the crisis years and the non-crisis period thereafter. Our results indicate that if asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are given a voice, they are more likely to be framed positively or as victims. However, if they are only mentioned, a negative frame is more common. Asylum seekers are also more likely to be negatively framed than migrants and refugees. Moreover, we find no differences between the elite and popular newspapers in how they frame and give a voice to these three actors.

Keywords: immigration news; framing; European migration crisis; European refugee crisis; asylum seekers; longitudinal content analysis

1. Introduction

Immigration is an issue that always has a relatively prominent place in the media and the political agenda. A vast body of research has already investigated the coverage of immigration in the news and its effects on public opinion and policy. While many of those studies focused on the frames and actors present in immigration news, concluding that immigrants themselves rarely receive a voice in the news (Benson and Wood 2015; Masini et al. 2018; Tyler and Marciniak 2013), they often considered actors such as refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers as one group (Van Gorp 2005; Masini and Van Aelst 2017; Beckers and Van Aelst 2019). Other researchers focused only on one type of actor, such as refugees (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; De Cock et al. 2018; Szczepanik 2016; Holzberg et al. 2018). The few studies that did focus on differences between the actor terms found that public perceptions about these actor groups differ, with the public, for instance, perceiving refugees as people who need more help compared to migrants (De Coninck 2020). These differences in perceptions might be a consequence of how these different groups are covered in the media, considering that most people get information on immigration through the media (Esses et al. 2013).

Moreover, variations in perceptions of deservingness and studies into, for instance, push and pull factors of migration (people being attracted or *pulled* to go to another country versus people having to leave their country, being *pushed* to another country), indicate that conceptual differences exist between asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants (Chauvin and

Garces-Mascarenas 2014; Holzberg et al. 2018; Lawlor and Tolley 2017; James and Mayblin 2016; Moore and Shellman 2004; Kang 2021). The terms refugees, (im)migrants, and asylum seekers are the ones that are employed by international organizations such as the United Nations (UNHCR 2016) and Amnesty International (2023). Therefore, it is likely that these terms will frequently be used in media coverage, as prior research indicates that the media often adopts the terminology employed by these official entities (Berry et al. 2016; Valdeón 2013). Therefore, the main focus of this study is to investigate the different news frames surrounding these three actors. Are the actor terms that are used in news coverage (e.g., migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers) and the voice these actors receive linked to the framing of a news item?

Research on the framing of immigration news has established several key frames that, on the one hand, portray immigrants as innocent victims in need of help or as opportunities to their countries of arrival, yet on the other hand, as intruders that pose a security and cultural threat to the respective host countries (Benson 2013; Innes 2010; Van Gorp 2005). However, the more negative frames focusing on crime, threats, and problems seem to take the upper hand (Benson 2013; Esses et al. 2013; Masini 2018). Most of these previous studies on news framing, however, focused on routine news periods. In 2015, an international migration crisis erupted and resulted in a large increase in the coverage of migration in the news (Beckers and Van Aelst 2019), this and was linked to an increase in negative coverage of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017; Kovar 2020; Heidenreich et al. 2019). The media were the first to refer to the period of 2015–2016 as a 'crisis' (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017), but official instances and NGOs later also used similar labels (e.g., UNHCR 2020; European Council 2023). Due to the abovementioned indications that news coverage changed in this crisis period, this paper will focus on different patterns in news coverage and framing between the European migrant crisis (2015–2016) and the period thereafter (2017–2020). For clarity reasons, we refer to the crisis period as the "European migration crisis" throughout this paper.

Hence, in this paper, we focus on how the actor terminology in immigration news is linked to three types of valence frames: negative, victim, and positive frames (based on Masini 2018). Studying differences in framing based on the protagonists in immigration news could bring more nuance to the debate on the framing of migration news as compared to previous studies taking these different actor terms together (Borah 2011; Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011; Cacciatore et al. 2016; Van Gorp 2006; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Moreover, this article will investigate whether there are differences in the framing of asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees between the crisis and routine news periods.

Not only might the actor terminology be related to the framing of immigration news, but also the agency they receive (Borah 2011; van Klingeren et al. 2015; De Coninck et al. 2018). Different actors compete to bring their message to the news, and the actors who get a voice achieve some sort of "power" over a news item. During the crisis period of 2015 to 2016, asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees were found to often remain voiceless (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017; Kovar 2020; Holzberg et al. 2018). This can be quite consequential, as this aligns with the "person-positivity bias" (Sears 1983): giving a voice to typically "weak" and less powerful actors, such as refugees, can boost their framing of an issue. Indeed, research has established that the voice actors receive is related to the frames that are used (Masini and Van Aelst 2017). Giving a voice to immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers might result in a more positive framing of immigration news.

Next to investigating how different actor terms are linked to specific news frames, our study wants to contribute by gaining a more thorough understanding of how the voice of refugees, migrants, or asylum seekers is related to the framing of a news item.

Based on a content analysis of 503 articles from the period 2015–2020 in the main elite and popular Belgian newspapers, this study provides new insights into the story behind the main subjects in the migration debate and how the terminology used by journalists might not be without consequences, as previous research has shown how news coverage, for instance, can influence public opinion on migration. By exploring how the actor

terms that are used and the voice those actors receive are linked to the framing of a news item, this study provides a novel understanding of journalistic choices made regarding immigration news.

2. Frames in Immigration News

People see a large part of the world through the lens of the media. How the media repeatedly represent similar news events can influence public perceptions and judgments. To understand reality, frames in the news can serve as a tool for audiences to interpret and understand problems in society (Szczepanik 2016; De Cock et al. 2018). In 1993, Entman was among the first to theoretically capture this phenomenon, viewing framing as a tool for journalists to define problems, identify causes and remedies, and/or deliver a moral judgment on these problems. Selection and salience are relevant processes of framing theory. Which information is selected and addressed in a news story in the first place determines its focus. Salience pertains to the type of information that is emphasized (e.g., by repetition). It increases the chance that people observe and notice this kind of information (Entman 1993). As immigration is a highly politicized topic, in which the 'power' between the different actors involved is unequally divided (e.g., between politicians and immigrants; Benson and Wood 2015; Masini et al. 2018; Tyler and Marciniak 2013), and as most people have little 'direct' real-life experience with it, news discourses on migration (whether consciously or not) can be quite consequential (Van Dijk 2000).

Hence, many studies have already focused on the general framing of immigration in the news and found similar patterns across countries and media systems. Van Gorp (2005) studied eight Belgian newspapers for the period 2000–2003 and found that asylum seekers, refugees, and illegal immigrants were portrayed as either "victims" or "intruders". The victim frame considered asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants as poor victims who are unable to change their current situation and are considered inferior and incapable. According to the intruder frame, the three actors are dangerous and viewed as a cultural and economic threat (Van Gorp 2005). Other, more recent studies, in general, found a more negative framing of immigration, with news focusing mainly on the security and economic consequences frames, while a focus on cultural consequences was less common (Fengler et al. 2020; Caviedes 2015; Jacobs and van der Linden 2017; Siapera et al. 2018). Journalists have been found to frequently employ negative frames and conflict when portraying migrants in European media (Esses et al. 2013; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017), although other studies suggest that a neutral or ambivalent tone about migration may be more prevalent, such as Fengler et al. (2020). In the Belgian context, Masini and Van Aelst (2017) concluded that the victimization viewpoint was used the most in six Belgian newspapers between 2013 and 2014, followed by negative viewpoints, with positive viewpoints as the least common option. Lams (2019) concluded that a shift occurred from the victim frame to the beneficiary frame in a Belgian and Dutch newspaper during the summer of 2015. In the beneficiary frame, refugees are portrayed as recipients of help, resulting in a more positive connotation than the victim frame.

2.1. Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Migrants

The actors that are present in a news item influence its content (Borah 2011; Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011). According to Entman (1993), there is a 'tug of war' between different actors to make their message dominate in the news and thus to play a role in the framing of a story. Previous research has often classified actors into broad categories of elites, including politicians and experts, and non-elites, consisting mainly of citizens (Gemi et al. 2012; Lunt 2009; Hopmann and Shehata 2011). In research specifically focusing on immigration, previous content analyses mostly used a broad actor category, taking immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers together under one label (Van Gorp 2005; Masini and Van Aelst 2017; Beckers and Van Aelst 2019). These broad categories provide little information about the distinction between the different actors that are the subject of immigration news. This paper will specifically focus on a more detailed distinction between the

meaning of the terms asylum seeker, a migrant, and a refugee, as they are the main subjects of immigration news and because they are found to typically have fewer opportunities to make it into the news than elite actors (Beckers and Van Aelst 2019; Masini et al. 2018).

What refugees are is defined in the Convention of Geneva (Conventie van Genève 2023). The Convention determined that refugees, who are threatened by prosecution in their country of origin, are unable to go back. According to the principle of non-refoulment, refugees cannot be sent back if their lives are in danger. As opposed to refugees, asylum seekers do not have this international protection. Asylum seekers aim to be recognized as refugees so they can apply for asylum. Asylum seekers who do not receive refugee status can be forcibly sent back (Amnesty International 2023; Crawley and Skelparis 2018; Moldovan 2016; Blumell et al. 2020). The term migrant is a bit more ambiguous than the previous two, as there is no universally agreed-upon definition at the international level. The term 'migrant' is often used as a sort of umbrella term for people who are moving to other countries or moving within their own country. The motives behind the movement can be voluntary or involuntary, and the process might be temporary or permanent. The reasons why people decide to become a migrant are diverse (IOM 2023; Douglas et al. 2019; Lee and Nerghes 2018). Sometimes, a distinction between refugees and migrants is made based on the reasons why people move or flee. Due to armed conflict or persecution, refugees are involuntarily forced to leave and move to more safe places. According to the definition of the United Nations Refugee Agency, the motives of migrants are often tied to voluntary aims of enhancing their lives, such as finding employment or reuniting with family members. Their lives are not directly threatened (UNHCR 2016). Migration includes the concepts "immigration" and "emigration" (Torkington and Ribeiro 2019).

According to the theory of push and pull factors, a distinction between asylum-related migration and labor migration can be made (James and Mayblin 2016). Push factors correspond with the idea that people must forcibly leave their country due to violent political or religious conflict. These conflicts often go hand-in-hand with economic problems such as poverty and unemployment. Pull factors are factors that attract people to come to these countries. Factors such as employment, standards of living, or higher wages are more important here. Therefore, these pull factors can be considered as important incentives for labor migrants who are often able to make a cost–benefit analysis (Moore and Shellman 2004; Kang 2021).

Hence, various labels can be used when talking about (im)migration; however, these labels are often non-uniform and incoherent. Even in the case when 'official' definitions are present, news media do not always correctly employ them (Paspalanova 2008; Torkington and Ribeiro 2019). In our study, we decided to focus on the terms that are most prevalent in official discourses around the topic of immigration (see, for instance: UNHCR 2016) and in media coverage (Crawley and Skelparis 2018; Torkington and Ribeiro 2019).

2.2. Asylum Seekers, Refugees, Migrants, and Framing

Academic studies that investigated immigration news coverage often grouped refugees and migrants together as a single category (Urbanikova and Tkaczyk 2020; Bosch et al. 2019; Amores and Arcila 2019), whereas studies that focused on the term asylum seekers are scarce (Parker 2015). Other studies were limited to one type of actor, for example, refugees (e.g., Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; De Cock et al. 2018; Szczepanik 2016; Holzberg et al. 2018).

By using labels such as "migrants" and "refugees", people are defined and distinguished in terms of agency, economic cost, the length of their stay, and their type of threat (Lee and Nerghes 2018; Lawlor and Tolley 2017; Baker et al. 2008; De Coninck 2020). In one of the few studies focusing on differences in news media framing of immigrants and refugees in Canadian print media coverage between 2005 and 2014, Lawlor and Tolley (2017) found that migrants and refugees were framed differently. They found a more negative tone in news items about refugees than in those about migrants. Migrants were defined and evaluated more in terms of their economic contribution. Refugees were framed

more in terms of deservingness (or the lack thereof). Chauvin and Garces-Mascarenas (2014) discovered that in media reports both inside and outside of Europe, refugees were typically portrayed as deserving of help and support, whereas migrants were portrayed as undeserving or less deserving. However, both were framed as belonging to the out-group, which threatens the homogenous in-group. A discourse analysis by Holzberg et al. (2018) showed how refugees were defined in terms of deservingness, as well. For the period 2015–2016, they found that refugees were assessed in the German media in terms of economic productivity (cost or useful), state security (destabilizing or assimilable), and gender (misogynist or victimized). Based on these studies, we expect that the media will frame these different actor categories in different manners.

RQ: *Are migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees linked to different frames in the news?*

2.3. (Non)-Crisis Period

Most of the abovementioned studies focused on immigration as a more routine news topic. Over the course of 2015, the European migration crisis was found to have changed the framing patterns of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in European news media. Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) researched elite newspapers in eight European countries in 2015 and found a shift from the humanitarian frame to the security frame after the terrorist attacks in Paris (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). The humanitarian frame represents migrants who became victims of human smugglers or as people who were victims of racism (Milioni et al. 2015). During the crisis years, newspapers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia used the security frame more often, depending on key events such as terrorist attacks, compared to the pre-crisis years (Kovar 2020). Similarly, in countries such as Hungary, Sweden, and Spain, a humanitarian frame prevailed at the beginning of 2015, but as the crisis evolved, the choice of frame switched to a restrictive border and refugee frame when the number of people arriving peaked. However, in Sweden, the humanitarian frame came back after the peak (Heidenreich et al. 2019).

Thus, it seems that the security frame and restrictive border frame, which belong to the 'threat' and hence the negative frame, peaked during the crisis years of 2015 and 2016. Considered as part of the victim frame, the humanitarian frame fluctuated with the security frame in many countries (Benson 2013). Based on the abovementioned studies, we also expect that asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are framed differently during the crisis and the non-crisis periods. Negative framing is expected to have increased during the crisis period (2015–2016) and to have decreased afterward (2017–2020).

H1a. *The negative frame will be more present in immigration news during the crisis period compared to the non-crisis period.*

H1b. *The victim frame will be more present in immigration news during the non-crisis period compared to the crisis period.*

H1c. *The positive frame will be more present in immigration news during the non-crisis period compared to the crisis period.*

2.4. Type of Newspaper

We further argue that the type of newspaper might influence news framing. According to Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky (2012), elite newspapers differ from popular newspapers in terms of content, audience, design, paper format, and journalism ethics. Elite newspapers focus more on hard news, concentrating on topics such as economics, domestic politics, and foreign policy, often targeting higher-educated audiences. On the other hand, soft news is often seen as the core of popular newspapers, with more focus on infotainment articles playing on the emotions of the audiences. However, next to their soft news focus that attracts audiences, these newspapers report on a wide variety of current events (Baum 2003). This might be particularly the case in media environments where there are no real tabloids that push others for a 'race to the bottom', as is the case in Flanders, Belgium.

Benson (2009) distinguished between popular and quality newspapers in a study of French and American media. He concluded that newspapers with an educated audience exhibited higher actor and viewpoint diversity in their coverage of immigration news. In the Belgian media landscape, Van Gorp (2005) determined that popular newspapers more frequently used the negative intruder frame than the victim frame, while the coverage in elite newspapers was more balanced. De Coninck et al. (2018) analyzed the relationship between media use and public opinion on immigrants and refugees and found that audiences who consume elite media exhibit more positive attitudes towards refugees and immigrants than those who consume popular media. Therefore, we could assume that the positive frames employed by the elite newspapers might have led to more positive opinions about immigrants and refugees. In line with this, Masini and Van Aelst (2017) found differences in framing by Flemish newspapers in Belgium. They explored migration news (2013–2014) in three popular and three elite newspapers and found that the popular newspapers framed migration news in a more negative manner than the elite newspapers. The victim frame was also used more frequently by popular newspapers, while the positive frame was used more by elite newspapers. However, the differences between the types of newspapers are relatively small and the boundaries between elite and popular newspapers have been blurring in recent years (Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky 2012). Nevertheless, based on the abovementioned studies, we expect that differences between elite and popular newspapers still existed for the research period of 2015 to 2020. Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis:

H2. *Elite newspapers frame the migration crisis more positively than popular newspapers.*

2.5. The Voice of Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Migrants

Actors in the news can be defined by their voice. By getting to speak in a news item versus being a passive actor merely being mentioned, actors can influence the framing of a news item. Several studies found that refugees rarely get a chance to speak up in news articles about the European migrant crisis (De Cock et al. 2018; Szczepanik 2016; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Lams 2019; Nikunen 2019).

De Cock et al. (2018) use the term "collective portrayal" to describe how representing refugees as a single group can result in the loss of their individual characteristics. By silencing refugees, they are decontextualized and cannot contribute to the framing of a news item (Fengler et al. 2020). Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) describe this as "symbolic bordering", which determines whether refugees are part of "our" community or not. Nikunen (2019) uses the term "strategic silence", where quantifying actors or speaking about them in a passive sense is a way to gain control over them. Speaking about "a thousand refugees", for example, anonymizes everyone in the group. According to Nikunen (2019), expressing refugees in numbers creates a distance between "us" and "them". Studying Belgian television news, Beckers and Van Aelst (2019) found that on the public service broadcaster, immigrants were quoted almost twice as often in the crisis period of 2015 compared to the period before, but not on their commercial counterpart. However, immigrants received a voice much less often compared to elite actors in the news.

These findings indicate that immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers rarely get a voice in the news, which could have significant implications for the way news coverage is framed. When these groups are not given a platform to express their perspectives, research suggests that it becomes easier to portray them in a negative light. Masini and Van Aelst (2017) concluded that when immigrants are given an opportunity to voice their experiences, there is a greater likelihood that the article will present a positive perspective on migration. This observation aligns with the concept of the 'person-positivity bias' (Sears 1983), which suggests that giving a voice to marginalized actors such as refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers can contribute to a more positive tone and framing of migration news. Based on these considerations, we propose our third hypothesis:

H3. *The framing of immigration news is more positive if asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants get to speak in the news articles.*

3. Method

To address our hypotheses and research questions, we performed a content analysis of Flemish newspaper articles from 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2020. We included the two most-read Flemish newspapers in their respective categories in our analysis: the elite newspaper *De Standaard* and the popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* (CIM 2021; De Bens and Raeymaeckers 2007). Both newspapers are part of different media groups in Belgium: *De Standaard* is a member of Mediahuis, Het Laatste Nieuws of DPG Media. This research was conducted in the small and highly concentrated news media market of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, which is characterized by its rather advantageous context for news quality, which makes it an interesting case to study. Print media still holds a relatively strong position in the news market, both online and offline (Newman et al. 2018). Furthermore, there is no significant 'tabloid' culture present. Although there are differences between popular and elite newspapers, with the former focusing more on soft news stories and human-interest news, the popular media also devote significant attention to hard news stories. The most-read news websites in Flanders are linked to traditional news outlets with highly comparable content and focus (CIM 2021), which reinforces our decision to use print media in our analysis.

A total of 503 articles from both *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* were collected through the online database Gopress. The search terms (in Dutch) (immigr* asylum* migr* refugee*) were used. Only articles that had a link with migration in Europe or the European migration crisis were selected. Articles about, for instance, immigrants at the US–Mexican border were not incorporated. The research period was divided into a crisis period (2015–2016) and a non-crisis period (2017–2020). Our choice to make this distinction was underpinned by the evolution of asylum applications in the European Union. In the period from 2017 to 2020, the number of applications was below one million, similar to the period before 2015. The figures swung around 720,000 asylum applications or lower. For two years (2015 and 2016), European countries received, yearly, circa 1.3 million applications (European Parliament n.d.). Additionally, looking at the total number of published articles in the crisis period of 2015 and 2016 (on average 4808 per year) compared to the years thereafter (with an average of 3278 articles per year in the period 2017–2020), a clear distinction can be seen. Therefore, we consider 2015 and 2016 as a period of crisis. However, it is important to acknowledge that this does not necessarily mean that immigration stopped being one of the main societal challenges in 2016. The presence of significant events in the Mediterranean Sea, ongoing debates regarding refugee accommodation, and the escalating polarization surrounding migration, fueled in part by far-right parties, all indicate that immigration continued to be a significant societal issue beyond 2016. We adopted the term 'crisis' in our study due to its prevalent usage by journalists, particularly during the years 2015–2016, when the European migration crisis or European refugee crisis garnered significant media attention (Beckers and Van Aelst 2019). Additionally, we decided to use the term 'crisis' based on the number of asylum applications and media attention. Words such as 'high influx' or 'peak' of asylum applications could serve as synonyms for the label 'crisis'. We recognize that our approach is just one way to make a distinction between the crisis and non-crisis periods.

The 503 articles were selected on a random basis. As comparing the two time periods was one of our main goals, we decided to draw a sample for each separate period. From a database of 9608 articles, the 2-year period of 2015–2016 consisted of a sample of 200 articles, based on leaps of 45. Then, 303 articles were sampled from a total of 13,114 articles for the period 2017–2020, based on leaps of 43. In Table 1, the number of articles coded per newspaper per year is displayed. Our database of 503 articles consists of 233 articles of *De Standaard* and 270 articles of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, which reflects the total number of articles in both newspapers.

Table 1. Number of articles included in analysis.

Year	Number of Articles	
	Het Laatste Nieuws	*De Standaard*
2015	61	32
2016	65	42
2017	40	39
2018	48	49
2019	33	45
2020	23	26
TOTAL	270	233

For every news article, the date, newspaper, title, subtitle, length (number of words), and page of the article were collected. We coded the number of words because the length of articles could be an important factor in how many actors and opinions come into play (Masini et al. 2018; Beckers and Van Aelst 2018). Regarding the actor coding, we identified whether the journalist referred to the term "refugee", "(im)migrant", or "asylum seeker" as dummy variables. One article could contain different actor terms. Researching the frames about migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, we used three affective frames: negative, victim, and positive, based on the study of Masini (2018). More information on the coding process and examples of the different frames can be found in Appendix A. One article could contain several frames. For our main dependent variables in our analyses, we constructed dummy variables for the different frames (1 = frame present; 0 = frame absent), as our goal was to predict the presence of these three frames (negative, victim, and positive).

Regarding the coding of the voice of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, we distinguished between an active voice and a passive voice. If migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers were quoted or paraphrased in an article, we labeled it as an active voice. Indirect quotes or paraphrases only appeared in our dataset once, which is why we decided to take direct and indirect quotes as one category of active voice. If an actor was only mentioned, we categorized it as a passive voice.

Intercoder reliability was calculated based on 48 news items (9.5%), which were randomly selected, so they comprised news items from the different media types and time periods (crisis versus non-crisis). These news items were double-coded by the authors, and Krippendorff's alpha values were calculated for all main variables. The scores for the framing variables ranged from 0.67 for the negative frame to 0.83 for the positive and 0.83 for the victim frame. For the variable indicating actor type, Krippendorff's alpha scores also reached satisfactory values ($KALPHA_{Asylum\ seeker} = 0.80$, $KALPHA_{Refugee} = 0.92$, $KALPHA_{(Im)migrant} = 0.85$), as well as for the agency of the actors ($KALPHA_{Active\ role} = 0.79$, $KALPHA_{Passive\ role} = 0.90$).

4. Results

In every news item, we started by identifying all frames that were present. One news item could contain several frames at the same time. A single news item could contain multiple frames simultaneously. We found that negative frames were most frequently used in immigration news coverage. Of all news items, 60% contained one or more negative frames, 40.9% a victim frame, and only 15.1% a positive frame, while 6.0% of news items did not contain any of these frames.

Regarding the prevalence of the different actor terms, the term 'refugee' was the most commonly used in our sample, appearing in 51.9% of the news items. The terms "immigrant" and "asylum seeker" were less frequently used, appearing in 27.8% and 25% of news items, respectively. In general, there were some differences between the two newspapers. Overall, the popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* used the terms asylum seeker and refugee more frequently, whereas the elite newspaper *De Standaard* used the more general term (im)migrant more often. Regardless, both newspapers referred to the

term "refugee" most frequently. Table 2 displays the prevalence of actor terms during the crisis period (2015–2016) versus the non-crisis period (2017–2020) that followed. Looking at differences between both periods, we see that in both media, the use of the term asylum seeker was almost twice as high in the crisis years. Not surprisingly, the term refugee was also more prevalent during the crisis years, although the difference was not significant for the elite newspaper. The more generic term "migrant" was used less frequently during the crisis years as compared to the non-crisis years that followed in both newspapers.

Table 2. Prevalence of news items containing the different actor types in the non-crisis versus the crisis periods.

	Popular Newspaper		Elite Newspaper	
	Crisis	**Non-Crisis**	**Crisis**	**Non-Crisis**
Asylum seeker	**42.10%**	18.80%	**31.1%**	14.50%
Refugee	61.10%	50.70%	**59.5%**	42.10%
Migrant	6.30%	**29.90%**	28.4%	**42.80%**

Note: Figures in bold significantly differed at $p < 0.05$, comparing the crisis and non-crisis periods for each newspaper.

Next, we coded the voice of these migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees and found that they rarely received a voice in the news. In only 5.6% of the news items did these actors get to actively speak for themselves. In the overwhelming majority of the cases (94.4%), migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees were passive subjects in the news, being reported on or referred to by other actors.

Frames and Actors

The main aim of our paper was to investigate how the different news frames relate to actor terms, the time period (crisis versus non-crisis), and the media type (elite versus popular). As previously stated, the negative frame was by far the most prevalent. Table 3 presents the factors that predict the presence of this frame in immigration news items. The first thing we found is that the actors that are used in the news item influenced whether journalists negatively framed immigration news. When journalists referred to asylum seekers in a news item, it had more than three times the chance to also contain a negative frame. We also found a positive effect for immigrants, who also frequently co-appeared with a negative frame. We did not find a difference between the crisis years (2015–2016) and the period thereafter (2017–2020), so we cannot accept hypothesis H1a. There was also no difference between the elite and the popular newspapers, whereby both used negative frames just as frequently. The news article length also did not influence the negative frames. Lastly, we found a strong effect for when asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants were able to speak in a news item, which greatly reduced the chance that a news item contained a negative frame. This result is in line with our third hypothesis.

Looking at the second model in Table 3, we can see that the presence of the victim frame, which was also frequently used in immigration news, was also related to the actor terms that were used in a news item. The term asylum seekers seemed to less frequently appear together with the victim frame. The other two actor types were not related to the presence or absence of the victim frame. We found a strong effect of the crisis period: During the crisis years 2015 and 2016, the victim frame was only half as likely to be present as compared to the non-crisis period. While in the crisis period, 31.5% of all news items contained one or more victim frames: this was 46.2% in the non-crisis period, which was against our expectation as formulated in hypothesis H1b. As with our findings for the presence of the negative frame, we also found that the victim frame was not impacted by the type of medium. Interestingly, the role of the actors had a significant effect. When immigrants had a voice in the news, the news item had a much higher chance of also containing victim frames.

Table 3. Binary logistic regressions, with the presence of a negative frame (1), victim frame (1), or positive frame (1) as dependent variables.

	Negative Frame (=1)			Victim Frame (=1)			Positive Frame (=1)		
	B	S.E.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Exp(B)
Medium (=elite newspaper)	−0.138	0.203	0.870	0.171	0.203	1.186	−0.362	0.279	0.696
News article length	0.000	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000	1.000
Crisis year (=1)	−0.177	0.208	0.838	−0.669 ***	0.211	0.512	−0.081	0.287	0.922
Actor types									
Asylum seeker (=1)	1.182 ***	0.295	3.260	−0.712 **	0.258	0.491	−0.474	0.386	0.623
Refugee (=1)	0.289	0.272	1.340	0.197	0.244	1.218	−0.089	0.353	0.915
(Im)migrant (=1)	0.627 *	0.281	1.870	0.048	0.254	1.049	0.160	0.362	1.174
Agency									
Active role (=1)	−2.042 ***	0.508	0.130	1.443 **	0.475	4.231	1.254 **	0.474	3.503
Passive role (=1)	−0.348	0.364	0.710	1.301 ***	0.384	3.673	−0.690	0.434	0.501
	Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.10			Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.12			Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.09		

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

Lastly, the positive framing of immigration news was the least common overall. Regarding the factors influencing the presence or absence of this frame in the news (Table 3), we found that it was not related to the actor terms used. Although we found that the terms asylum seekers and refugees had a negative effect on the presence of the positive frame, while immigrants had a positive effect, these differences were not significant. We found no differences between the crisis and non-crisis periods, nor between the elite and popular newspapers, rejecting hypotheses H1c and H2. The agency of the actors did influence the positive framing: when immigrants were given a voice in a news item, they were more likely to be associated with a positive frame, as we posited in our third hypothesis.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Asylum seekers, refugees, and (im)migrants play a central role in news articles about immigration. However, previous research often took these main protagonists in immigration news together under one actor label. However, these terms have different meanings, and by distinguishing asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants as three different types of actors, this research gained insight into how the use of these actors and the voice they receive in immigration news are related to the framing of a news item. Based on a content analysis of 503 articles from the period 2015–2020 in Belgian newspapers, we also focused on differences between the European migration crisis and the period thereafter.

Our results showed that news items covered "refugees" most frequently, both during the crisis and non-crisis periods. In both the elite and popular newspapers, similar patterns emerged for the two other actor types, with asylum seekers being the subject more often during the crisis years, whereas news items referred to the term (im)migrant more often in non-crisis coverage. If we look at the agency these actors received in the news, our analysis supports the findings of previous research (De Cock et al. 2018; Szczepanik 2016; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Nikunen 2019). Asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants did not receive a voice and remained passive subjects in 94.4% of the cases. In majority of the observed news articles, they were only mentioned by journalists or referred to by other actors (e.g., politicians) who did get the chance to speak up in the article.

The main focus of our paper, however, was to investigate how these actor terms were related to the overall framing of immigration news. News items comprised a negative frame most of the time, followed by the victim frame and the positive frame, which was by far the least common. Although some previous studies looked at how specific actors such as refugees or migrants were framed (Urbanikova and Tkaczyk 2020; Parker 2015; Bosch et al. 2019; Amores and Arcila 2019), comparing how frames were related to the different actor types revealed several interesting patterns. Asylum seekers and (im)migrants had a higher chance to co-appear with negative news frames and less frequently appeared

together with the victim frame. These results indicate that prior research, which grouped all the actor terms into a single actor category (such as Beckers and Van Aelst 2019; Cacciatore et al. 2016; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000), may not have captured all the subtleties of immigration news coverage.

Our sample was divided into a crisis period (2015–2016) and a non-crisis period (2017–2020). We found that the three actor types were framed less often as victims during the crisis period than during the non-crisis period. It seems that there was more focus on the administrative burden caused by the arrival of refugees instead of using a human-interest focus on the refugees' conditions and stories. No differences were found between the popular and elite newspapers, despite our expectation that elite newspapers would frame the migration crisis more positively than their popular counterparts. This seems to be in line with previous research (e.g., Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky 2012) that argues that the boundaries between elite and popular newspapers have been blurring in recent years.

Lastly, giving a voice to asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees positively boosted the frame of that news article. We found that giving a voice to the three actor groups had a higher chance to co-appear with a positive frame and a victim frame. If they were only mentioned, a negative frame was present more often. Our findings again supported the "person-positivity bias", as having a voice provides actors with the opportunity to contribute to the framing of a news item, which then leads to a more positive framing (Masini and Van Aelst 2017; Sears 1983). Our study contributes to the ongoing conversation about the significance of viewpoint diversity in highly politicized topics, as we found that news framing tends to be influenced by the lack of representation for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, with elites such as politicians dominating the coverage (Beckers and Van Aelst 2019; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017).

Our findings have implications for journalistic coverage of immigration news. This study showed that the meaning and framing of the different actors in the migration debate are not the same, and thus that words (or actor terms) matter. Journalists need to be careful in their word choices when reporting on migration news. Previous research found that how immigration and the involved actors are framed in the news can influence public opinion (e.g., Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden 2007; Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009; Benson and Wood 2015). Our study concludes that each actor term seems to have its own connotation. These patterns are important because they shed light on the ways in which media coverage can perpetuate negative stereotypes and misconceptions about migration (De Coninck 2020). For instance, if journalists systematically use the term "asylum seeker" in conjunction with negative framing, it may perpetuate negative attitudes towards asylum seekers among the general public. Similarly, if journalists would use a term in conjunction with positive framing, it may have the opposite effect and promote more positive attitudes towards different groups.

We need to acknowledge some of the limitations of our study. Based on our analysis, we could not determine the causality of our results. Do journalists choose a specific actor term based on the framing of a news item or vice versa? Additionally, we lack knowledge on how deliberate these practices by journalists are. It is possible that journalists occasionally utilize a specific actor term with an unintended meaning (e.g., referring to "asylum seekers" when talking about "refugees"). Moreover, as we were interested in finding systematic patterns, our study focused on three aggregate valence frames: negative, victim, and positive, but we did not go in-depth into specific subframes. Further investigation could delve into the multiple layers of the three valence frames to analyze whether some subframes are related to a specific actor term. Moreover, this paper solely focused on three actors, but these protagonists, in turn, could be further subdivided into new types of asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees, such as climate refugees or refugees from Ukraine. Moreover, by focusing mostly on these three terms, we might have missed other terms that are used in the media to refer to specific types of immigrants, such as "illegals". Furthermore, we were specifically interested in migrant actors, and not in other actor categories. As previous research has shown that elite sources such as politicians

are the ones mostly receiving a voice in immigration news (Beckers and Van Aelst 2019; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017), it would be interesting to study how politicians and other types of actors (such as professionals and experts, civil society organizations, and citizens) are related to news framing. Therefore, our study can serve as a starting point to further examine how different quoted actors may affect the framing of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants.

Although this study focused on news coverage in only one country, we do not expect these results to be highly context-specific. The media landscape, characterized by a relatively strong public service broadcaster and high levels of journalistic professionalism, is comparable in several European countries, particularly those considered 'corporatist democratic countries' in the northern and central regions of Europe. Previous research also established, for instance, that the prevalence of these frames and the underrepresentation of immigrant voices in the media are similar across European contexts (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017). However, it would be interesting to compare different media contexts as to how asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are framed. Is the link between framing and actor types a European phenomenon? As frames are utilized by audiences to interpret and comprehend societal problems, studying variations in framing associated with actor types in immigration news could add greater nuance to public opinion regarding the migration debate. People seem to hold more positive attitudes toward and feel less threatened by "refugees" than by "immigrants", for instance (De Coninck 2020). Which actor terms journalists use in which contexts might be consequential for the way the public thinks about the different protagonists. Thus, it is essential for journalists to be aware of the influence of their language on the public discourse surrounding migration, and to use their platform to support informed and nuanced conversations about this complex issue.

Appendix A

Table A1. Codebook, Based on Masini (2018).

Frame	Examples
Negative frame Asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants as . . . 1. A general threat 2. An economic threat 3. A cultural/moral/ethnic/demographic threat 4. An administrative/logistic problem 5. Having negative characteristics (e.g., cannot be trusted) 6. An administrative/organizational burden	*Police and volunteers fear more violence from (trans)migrants in the Maximilian park now that the immigration office is actively dropping off released migrants from the handling center at the asylum counter, opposite the park.* (HLN 2018, September 18) *The inflow of refugees is a fact, this way we want to continue to guarantee social security for all Belgians," says Member of Parliament Sarah Smeyers.* (HLN 2015, September 21) *"The problems with transmigrants at Brussels North Station must be resolved in the "very short term," says Minister of Asylum and Migration Maggie De Block. (Open VLD) Among other things, she is commissioning research into whether the group of people cannot be taken care of elsewhere.* (HLN 2019, May 6) *'Number of times that refugees traveled to the United Kingdom in his cargo? "Four times." Number of times he was also attacked? "Four times too!" Every time in Calais. Everyone remembers the images of distraught refugees and seething migrants storming truckers. "My respect is gone," he says (truck driver David)'.* (HLN 2018, January 27) *"We are in crisis mode (. . .). The increase in the number of people applying for asylum in Belgium is putting pressure on the asylum network. The collective centers, which have 13,500 places, are 99 percent full. Some are already 'above 100 percent'.* (DS 2018, November 17)
Victim frame Asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants as . . . 1. Victims of global economy or business practices 2. Victims of unjust government policies 3. Facing dangerous situations 4. Being discriminated/victims of racism 5. Having poor living conditions	*More and more children are becoming victims of human traffickers and the refugee crisis is only exacerbating their situation.* (DS 2016, May 20) *Ethno-cultural minorities in our countries feel threatened by racism, discrimination and populist parties. And in the media, migration is hardly ever discussed positively.* (DS 2019, June 12) *Thousands of people have to spend nights in the open air, without tents, blankets, or heating, while temperatures drop to a few degrees above freezing point at night. Many newcomers have walked for days or traveled in open trucks.* (DS 2019, May 1)
Positive frame Asylum seekers, refugees, or migrants as . . . 1. A general opportunity 2. An economic opportunity 3. A cultural/moral/ethnic/demographic opportunity 4. Having positive characteristics (e.g., can integrate into cultural mores and civic obligations)	*"Many entrepreneurs in Antwerp are confronted with vacancies that are difficult to fill. At the same time, there is a large group of recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection who are eager to get started. With the project 'Jobroad' we try to bring these two parties together."* (HLN 2018, March 16) *'Everyone on the field': that's the name of the social integration project, in which VK Langemark-Poelkapelle has been recognized by the Belgian Football Association (KBVK) as a pilot project. Football clubs are encouraged to let asylum seekers join in the fun.* (HLN 2017, August 25) *Six refugees from the Red Cross reception center can take free music lessons for a year at the music academy in Menen, thanks to a project by Klara. "Giving piano lessons to them will be a challenge," says piano teacher Geert Valcke. He doesn't speak English. "But we are totally into it."* (HLN 2017, October 14)

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