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Role of Imagery in News Coverage of Border Security and Migration

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Abstract

Imagery plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and understanding of border security and migration. As migration crises intensify globally, particularly across Africa, Europe, and the Americas, the media often utilize powerful visuals to construct compelling narratives. This conceptual paper explores how visual imagery in news coverage influences the framing of border security and migrants, often reducing complex humanitarian issues to simplistic security discourses. Drawing from studies on Greece, the U.S. - Mexico border, and the Polish - Belarusian migration crises, as well as research on Nigeria's migration governance, the paper reveals how migrants are portrayed as threats, victims, or dehumanized masses. The theoretical framework guiding this study is securitization theory. The researchers recommended adopting ethical journalistic practices that offer balanced representations and incorporating policy reforms that regulate media portrayals of migration. Ultimately, this paper emphasizes the need for a human-centric visual narrative that aligns with international humanitarian values while preserving national security interests.

Keywords: Migration imagery, border security, media framing, visual representation, news coverage.

Introduction

International organization of migration (2026) establishes that the media has long been a powerful tool in shaping public opinion, particularly in contexts of conflict, migration, and national security. In an era of mass displacement due to conflicts, climate change, and economic instability, migration has become a highly politicized issue globally. Border security, in response, has gained renewed attention as countries grapple with illegal migration, trafficking, and transnational crimes. News coverage, especially through imagery, becomes a lens through which the public views and interprets these complex issues



(2025). Visuals of migrants crossing deserts, barbed wire fences, and overcrowded camps have become symbolic of the so-called “migration crisis.” However, such representations are not neutral they are constructed within sociopolitical contexts and shaped by editorial choices, often reinforcing dominant ideologies about threat, security, and national identity.

One of the central concerns in contemporary media studies is how the visual framing of events influences public attitudes and government responses. Visuals are often more potent than text in evoking emotional responses and can crystallize complex socio-political issues into simplified narratives (Kalfeli et al., 2022). For example, images of migrants storming fences or being apprehended by border agents evoke a sense of invasion, disorder, and urgency. These portrayals contribute to the “securitization” of migration, wherein migration is treated not as a humanitarian or economic issue, but as a national security threat. Scott (2024) highlights how major international wire agencies like Reuters and Getty Images consistently reproduce stereotypical visuals of migrants as helpless, dangerous, or anonymous reinforcing a hegemonic narrative that legitimizes border militarization and exclusionary policies.

This visual framing is not limited to Western contexts. In Nigeria and other parts of Africa, migration coverage remains largely textual and often fails to incorporate visual elements that could humanize or contextualize the stories of migrants and border communities. Where imagery is used, it tends to borrow heavily from global tropes that depict migrants as destitute or criminal, as seen in the study by Ogbue et al. (2025) on migration governance in Northeast Nigeria. The Nigerian media, influenced by state narratives and limited journalistic capacity, often downplays the socio-economic drivers of migration and overlooks the lived experiences of migrants. This results in a fragmented public understanding of migration that lacks empathy and nuance, further reinforcing xenophobic attitudes and justifying harsh border policies.

Moreover, the political economy of media production plays a significant role in shaping migration imagery. Newsrooms operate under commercial and political pressures that influence which stories are told and how they are visualized. Journalists and photojournalists covering migration crises are often constrained by time, access, and editorial guidelines (Etumnu et al., 2024). As Scott (2024) revealed, photographers on the U.S.-Mexico border face restrictions from border patrol agents, NGOs, and even news outlets themselves, limiting their ability to capture authentic and diverse representations of migrants. In Greece, Kalfeli et al. (2022) found that mainstream media coverage was dominated by elite narratives, with little input from migrants themselves. Such systemic constraints lead to the recycling of conventionalized images that reinforce existing power structures and marginalize migrant voices.

The impact of such imagery extends beyond news consumption to policy formulation and international diplomacy. Images of migration crises are often weaponized by political actors to gain electoral advantage or to justify the deployment of surveillance technologies, restrictive laws, and international agreements that prioritize border control over human rights. The case of the Polish-Belarusian border crisis (Kosman, 2025) and the securitization of the Nigeria-Niger border exemplify how visuals have been used to galvanize public support for aggressive border measures. This underscores the urgent need for ethical and human-centered journalism that challenges dehumanizing tropes and foregrounds the dignity of migrants.

While scholarly attention has been given to the politics of migration and border security, there is limited focus on the role of visual representation in shaping migration discourse. In many cases, news imagery perpetuates stereotypes, incites fear, or erases the agency of migrants. For instance, research shows that in Greek media, refugees are often shown as faceless masses or as threats at the gates of Europe (Kalfeli et al., 2022). In Nigeria, weak border security and the absence of integrated visual communication strategies further complicate migration governance (Ogbue et al., 2025). The problem is further exacerbated by



editorial bias, limited journalistic autonomy, and political interference in migration reporting (Scott, 2024). This gap in scholarship on visual framing necessitates a conceptual exploration of the intersection between imagery, media framing, and border migration narratives.

Moreover, the problem becomes more pronounced when considering the securitization of migration in media imagery. Migrants are often depicted through a lens of suspicion and threat reinforcing state-driven narratives that treat migration primarily as a security risk rather than a humanitarian issue (Madubuofu, 2025). This one-sided portrayal can justify hardline policies such as border militarization, surveillance expansion, and restrictive asylum procedures. It can also distort public understanding by conflating irregular migration with criminality, terrorism, or economic burden, thereby fueling xenophobia and policy indifference to migrant suffering. In contexts like the U.S. and Mexico border or the Polish and Belarusian migration crisis, the media has frequently emphasized images of fences, armed guards, and overcrowded camps, marginalizing the lived experiences of migrants themselves (Scott, 2024; Kosman, 2025). These representational patterns are not only ethically questionable but also strategically significant creating a discursive environment where punitive border policies gain popular support, and the humanitarian obligations of the state are overlooked or undermined.

Therefore, this study is timely and necessary it critically explores how imagery shapes, distorts, or enriches the discourse on border security and migration, with the aim of promoting more balanced and humane visual storytelling.

Literature Review

Mirzoeff (1999) examine how imagery in the news refers not just to visual representations such as photographs and video footage, but also to the symbolic elements embedded in those visuals. These symbols can reinforce dominant ideologies or challenge them depending on how the imagery is constructed and interpreted. In the case of migration, for example, images of crowded boats, border fences, and children crying have come to symbolize crisis, desperation, and at times, threat. The repetitive use of such imagery leads to the normalization of certain ideas and emotions in the audience's psyche. Visual imagery thus serves both a representational and emotional function it informs the audience and shapes how they feel about what they see.

The editorial decision to use particular images is shaped by broader institutional, political, and economic interests. Photojournalists are often constrained by what is accessible to them, the policies of the organizations they work for, and the audience's expectations. According to Scott (2024), the conditions of image production are marked by scarcity of resources and a lack of editorial independence. This results in repetitive and conventionalized imagery that lacks nuance or humanity. These choices are seldom neutral and often serve the interest of power by reproducing dominant narratives, such as portraying migrants as threats to national sovereignty or as helpless victims requiring state intervention.

Molek-Kozakowska (2013) discussed imagery in news media functions within a competitive media environment where sensationalism is prioritized. Powerful visuals are used to attract audience attention in an oversaturated information economy. This has led to the commercialization of suffering, where tragic or dramatic images are used to drive engagement without offering deeper context or solutions. As a result, the audience is exposed to shock-inducing visuals but is not necessarily informed in a meaningful way about the structural issues driving migration. Ethical concerns thus arise around the representation of vulnerable populations, the risk of trauma exposure, and the decontextualization of images from the broader migration discourse.



Border Security

Byrne et al. (2015) define border security refers to the policies, mechanisms, and structures used by states to monitor and regulate the flow of people, goods, and services across international boundaries. It is a core function of national sovereignty and is often justified on the grounds of preventing crime, terrorism, human trafficking, and illegal migration. However, border security is increasingly being securitized, where even humanitarian migration is framed through a national security lens. This securitization, often reinforced through visual media, transforms migrants into potential threats and legitimizes the expansion of surveillance and military interventions along borders (Byrne et al., 2015).

The challenge with border security in many developing countries, especially in Nigeria, lies in the weak institutional frameworks and porous nature of the borders. Ogbue et al. (2025) noted that the Nigerian borders, particularly in the Northeast, are susceptible to infiltration due to poor manpower, corruption, and lack of modern surveillance technologies. This weakness creates vulnerabilities that are exploited by criminal networks engaged in smuggling, trafficking, and arms proliferation. In such contexts, border security is not just a military or administrative issue but also one of governance, requiring inter-agency coordination, regional cooperation, and technological investment.

Border security also raises ethical and legal dilemmas, particularly when it comes to handling refugees and asylum seekers. Measures such as pushbacks, detention centres, and militarised border patrols often contravene international human rights standards. As seen in the Polish-Belarusian border crisis (Kosman, 2025), restrictive policies and harsh visuals of border confrontations contribute to an atmosphere of fear and exclusion. These practices are not only controversial but also counterproductive, as they may exacerbate the conditions that lead to irregular migration. Hence, a balanced approach to border security must consider both the protection of national interests and the humanitarian needs of migrants.

Migration

International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2026) defines migration as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing voluntary and involuntary movement of individuals or groups from one geographic region to another, typically for reasons related to conflict, climate, economy, or persecution. It is shaped by “push” factors (such as war, poverty, and environmental disasters) and “pull” factors (such as job opportunities, safety, and better living conditions). Migration has significant implications for both the countries of origin and destination, influencing demographics, economies, and cultural identities. However, the portrayal of migration in media often simplifies these complexities, framing it predominantly as a crisis rather than a structural reality of global inequality.

Irregular migration, in particular, is often at the center of political and media debates. Irregular or undocumented migrants are usually depicted negatively in public discourse, associated with crime, disease, and social burden. In Nigeria, for instance, Madubuofu (2025) found that poor border governance and youth unemployment drive irregular migration from the Southeast, while government initiatives to address the issue have been hampered by structural limitations. The representation of these migrants in media rarely captures these structural drivers. Instead, the narrative focuses on individual choices or criminal intent, ignoring systemic failures in governance, development, and global economic inequality.

Migration should also be understood as a human security issue, not just a border control challenge. As Idigo (2025) argues, migration impacts economic security, public health, and social cohesion in Nigeria. Migrants face risks such as trafficking, exploitation, and xenophobia, especially when legal protection mechanisms are weak or absent. Moreover, their representation in media especially through visuals can influence how host communities perceive and treat them. A narrow, security-focused view of migration



often leads to repressive policies, whereas a broader, human rights-based perspective could encourage integration and support for vulnerable populations.

Media Framing

Entman (1993) wrote that media framing refers to the process by which journalists and news outlets select certain aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communication. This selection process is crucial because it influences how audiences interpret information. In the context of border security and migration, framing determines whether migrants are seen as victims, criminals, or heroes. It influences policy debates and public attitudes, thereby affecting real-world outcomes. For example, if migrants are consistently framed as a threat, governments may feel compelled to adopt harsher immigration laws and deploy military forces at borders.

Frames are often shaped by broader ideological, political, and cultural contexts. In many cases, media outlets align with the dominant political ideology or reflect the interests of those in power. In Greece, for example, Kalfeli et al. (2022) found that right-leaning tabloids often framed migrants as invaders or burdens, whereas left-leaning outlets were more likely to frame them as vulnerable individuals in need of protection. These framing differences are not just editorial choices; they are deeply political acts that shape public discourse and, by extension, policy. Moreover, media framing interacts with imagery to produce powerful effects. An image of a child behind barbed wire, for instance, can evoke sympathy if framed as a humanitarian crisis but may evoke fear if framed as part of a security breach. Thus, framing is not limited to language; it encompasses visual, emotional, and symbolic elements. Understanding media framing is essential to decoding the messages conveyed through news reports and to ensuring a more balanced and ethical approach to reporting on migration and border security.

Symbolic Annihilation

Symbolic annihilation Gerbner and Gross (1976) refers to the systematic underrepresentation or misrepresentation of certain groups in media. Coined by media theorist George Gerbner and expanded by Gaye Tuchman, the term originally applied to the marginalization of women in media, but it has since been extended to include ethnic minorities, refugees, and migrants. In migration coverage, symbolic annihilation occurs when migrants are either left out of narratives entirely or portrayed in stereotypical and dehumanizing ways. This lack of visibility or one-dimensional portrayal contributes to social exclusion and reinforces power imbalances.

Scott (2024) found that photojournalists covering the U.S.-Mexico border were often pressured to produce imagery that conformed to dominant political narratives. This included images that showed migrants in passive, vulnerable, or threatening poses, with little room for complexity or individuality. As a result, migrants were stripped of agency and reduced to symbols of crisis or disorder. Such visual practices not only distort reality but also erase the lived experiences of those most affected by migration policies. Gerbner and Gross (1976) concludes that symbolic annihilation is particularly harmful because it extends beyond media representation it affects how migrants are treated by the public, policy-makers, and even legal institutions. When a group is consistently portrayed as less than human, it becomes easier to justify policies that neglect or harm them. Thus, the ethical responsibility of media practitioners is not only to inform but also to ensure that their coverage affirms the dignity and humanity of all people, especially those in vulnerable situations like migrants and refugees.



The Role of Imagery in News Coverage

Beyond its informative function, imagery in news coverage carries profound ethical implications, especially in how it influences public emotions and policymaking. Visual content is often selected to elicit strong emotional reactions shock, fear, sympathy which can inadvertently or deliberately manipulate viewers' perceptions. For instance, recurring images of children in distress or migrants behind fences are used to tug at humanitarian sensibilities but may also reinforce a narrative of helplessness. Conversely, portraying migrants in chaotic border crossings or confrontations with security personnel can stoke xenophobic fears and justify authoritarian immigration policies. These editorial choices raise questions about consent, dignity, and agency particularly when migrants are photographed in vulnerable states without their permission. As Scott (2024) observed, photojournalists often work under constraints where the need to produce compelling visuals for fast-paced news cycles compromises ethical standards, resulting in conventionalised, decontextualised portrayals that strip individuals of their humanity and complexity.

Equally significant is how audiences interpret and internalise these images. The media's visual framing can either reinforce existing prejudices or challenge dominant narratives, depending on how stories are constructed and the viewers' prior beliefs. According to Kalfeli et al. (2022), imagery used in Greek media largely dehumanized migrants, with 70% of visuals portraying them as faceless crowds, which fostered social distance and desensitization. In contrast, when migrants are depicted as individuals with names, families, and aspirations, they are more likely to be perceived empathetically. However, such nuanced representation is rare due to pressures of sensationalism and ideological bias in media institutions. Audience reception is also influenced by cultural and political contexts; what is perceived as humanitarian in one country may be interpreted as threatening in another. Therefore, imagery is not passively consumed it is filtered through layers of political ideology, historical memory, and media literacy. This underscores the need for critical visual literacy programmes that help the public deconstruct and question the imagery they are exposed to in the context of migration and security coverage.

The Role of Imagery on News Coverage of Border Security and Migration

Another dimension of the role of imagery in border security and migration reporting is the temporal and spatial distancing created through selective framing. Media outlets often rely on dramatic or emotionally charged images taken at the most critical or sensational moments of a migration event such as overcrowded boats, distressed children, or clashes at borders to draw attention and evoke reactions. While these visuals can raise awareness, they frequently detach audiences from the broader political and socioeconomic contexts that drive migration. For example, in the U.S.-Mexico border coverage, visuals frequently depict migrants crossing deserts or being apprehended by armed border agents, reinforcing a crisis narrative without addressing root causes like climate change, economic hardship, or political persecution. Similarly, in Nigerian media, visuals tend to focus on border patrols and intercepted smugglers, framing the issue through the lens of criminality rather than humanitarian urgency (Ogbue et al., 2025). Such coverage not only simplifies complex realities but also encourages public support for securitized responses border walls, mass deportations, and militarized patrols while suppressing more empathetic or rights-based solutions. The overreliance on crisis imagery ultimately shapes migration as an episodic problem, rather than a long-term developmental, political, and humanitarian issue that requires nuanced public engagement.

Furthermore, the invisibility of certain migration stories due to lack of compelling visuals underscores the profound power of imagery to determine what is considered newsworthy. Migrants who do not fit the dominant visual tropes such as middle-class, educated, or those migrating through legal channels are often excluded from the news narrative altogether. This exclusion results in a skewed public understanding of



who migrants are and why they migrate. In the Greek media case, Kalfeli et al. (2022) found that nine out of ten images of migrants portrayed them in 'states of exception,' such as behind fences or in boats, which erases individuality and reinforces a sense of "otherness." Rarely are migrants shown in everyday settings working, studying, or participating in community life images that would challenge stereotypes and foster empathy. In Nigeria and broader West Africa, media houses often lack the resources or editorial interest to commission deeper photo essays or follow-up stories that highlight migrants' lived experiences, successes, or contributions to society (Madubuofu, 2025). This visual omission contributes to policy responses that focus narrowly on containment and security rather than integration and inclusion. By dictating what is seen and unseen, imagery not only informs public discourse but also legitimizes specific state actions and policy directions, often without contestation or critical reflection.

Theoretical framework

Securitization Theory, as articulated by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), provides a critical framework for understanding how migration is framed as a security issue within political discourse. This theory posits that political actors, including the media, play a pivotal role in constructing certain issues as existential threats that require extraordinary measures. In the context of migration, the portrayal of migrants as potential security threats can lead to heightened public fear and anxiety, which in turn influences state responses and policies. For instance, news media often utilize sensational imagery and language to depict migrants as dangerous or undesirable, reinforcing the notion that they pose a threat to national security and social cohesion. This framing not only shapes public opinion but also legitimizes the implementation of stringent immigration policies and border controls, effectively normalizing the idea that migration must be managed through securitization (Huysmans, 2000). By analyzing the discursive practices surrounding migration, Securitization Theory reveals how narratives constructed by political actors and media outlets can significantly impact societal perceptions and policy decisions regarding migration.

Moreover, Securitization Theory underscores the interplay between visual representation and public perception in the context of migration. The use of imagery in news coverage is not merely a reflection of reality but actively shapes the audience's understanding of migrants and migration issues. For example, the framing of migrants in distressing situations such as overcrowded boats or desperate border crossings serves to evoke emotional responses that can lead to calls for increased security measures (Van Dijk, 1993). This phenomenon illustrates how visual elements can reinforce the narrative of migration as a security threat, thus perpetuating a cycle where negative perceptions lead to harsher policies, which in turn further stigmatize migrants. By employing Securitization Theory, researchers can critically assess the implications of media representations on public discourse and policy, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of migration that transcends simplistic security narratives (Buzan et al., 1998). Through this lens, it becomes evident that addressing the complexities of migration requires a shift away from securitization towards a more human-centered approach that acknowledges the rights and experiences of migrants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Imagery in news coverage plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions and influencing policy on border security and migration. Across different global contexts from Nigeria to the U.S., Greece, and Poland visual representations often reinforce dominant narratives that portray migrants as threats, victims, or faceless masses, contributing to their dehumanization and symbolic marginalisation. These images, shaped by political, institutional, and editorial pressures, frequently prioritize national security concerns over humanitarian realities. Without ethical and inclusive visual storytelling, media coverage risks perpetuating fear, bias, and misinformation. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the power of imagery as



a tool of influence and advocate for responsible media practices that balance security discourse with empathy, accuracy, and respect for human dignity.

Recommendations

Based on this review, the following were recommended;

1. Journalists should be trained to ethically represent migration using inclusive and balanced visuals.
2. Diversified Sources: Newsrooms should amplify the voices and images of migrants to counteract symbolic annihilation.
3. Policy Collaboration: Governments should work with media regulatory bodies to develop ethical guidelines for migration coverage.
4. Audience Sensitization: Public awareness campaigns can help audiences critically interpret migration imagery.
5. Support for Photojournalists: Increased autonomy and safety for field journalists can promote more authentic visual storytelling.
6. Use of Humanizing Imagery: Shift the focus from surveillance and threat to resilience, agency, and the personal stories of migrants.

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