

HESTER GARTRELL, Muslim or Migrant? An Exploration of the Portrayal of Syrian Refugees in the British Press

This article explores how Syrian refugees were portrayed in the British press following the death of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who drowned along with his mother and brother while trying to reach Europe. It begins with a literature review of previous studies, which have explored how refugees, asylum seekers and migrants (RASM), and Muslims are portrayed in the British press. This review reveals that, although there is clearly overlap between how RASM and Muslims are represented, there has been little in depth examination of what happens when the two concepts are brought together, such as in the case of Syrian refugees. This article analyses three representative British newspapers and argues that the British press largely avoids identifying Syrian refugees as Muslim while identifying violent groups, which have caused Syrian refugees to flee, as Muslim. The article argues that the British press portrays them through an existing discourse of migration, which places them within debates about immigration and Britain's place within the European Union. In the articles analysed, Syrian refugees were rarely identified as Muslims and were instead primarily described as innocent civilians whose religion was not specified. Rather than presenting Syrian refugees as moderate Muslims in opposition to the violence of Islamic State, Syrian refugees' religion is largely overlooked. This denotes the tendency of the British press to present a homogeneous Islam stripped of its internal diversities and debates, through the failure of identifying Syrian refugees as Muslims who oppose the violence and values of Islamic State.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, over four million Syrians have fled their country and registered as refugees (UNHCR 2015). The majority of refugees have settled in the surrounding countries of Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon; however, an increasing number of people have begun to travel to Europe (UNHCR 2015). This has steered extensive British media coverage of the civil war in Syria and Europe's response to those fleeing from it. This media coverage spiked following the death of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who drowned alongside his family while trying to reach Europe on the 2 September 2015 (Yazkan *et al.* 2015: 187).

This article aims to explore this spike by using content and discourse analyses methods described below to survey depictions of Syrian refugees in three national British newspapers. Initially, it outlines the methodology and assesses the current literature concerning portrayals of refugees and Muslims in the British press. Although there is extensive literature on both subjects, there has been no in-depth exploration of how Syrian or Muslim refugees are characterised by the British press. The article analyses how Syrian refugees are depicted in the British press and explores whether they are primarily presented as Muslim refugees fleeing from conflict or as migrants - the latter referring to people who move from one place to another for work or better living conditions. This analysis will demonstrate that the British press avoids identifying Syrian refugees as Muslims and instead primarily refers to Islam in connection with the violent terrorist group, Islamic State, which has caused Syrians to flee their country. Comparatively, Syrian refugees are primarily identified as migrants by both liberal and conservative newspapers; newspapers place them within a wider discourse of migration. This wider discourse concerns larger debates regarding Britain's place in the EU and concerns about immigration.

Methodology

The media articles analysed were selected through the LexisLibrary¹ news archive using ‘Aylan Kurdi’ as a search term. As suggested above, this search term was used due to the increased coverage of Syrian refugees after the death of Aylan Kurdi (Yazkan *et al.* 2015:187). It yielded a wide range of material and provided an opportunity to explore whether Aylan Kurdi’s death, and its subsequent coverage, significantly affected the way in which Syrian refugees were represented in the British press when compared to existing academic literature on refugee portrayal (see Baker *et al.* 2008; Baker and McEnery 2005; Philo *et al.* 2013). The articles found by using Aylan Kurdi as a search term were chosen from three newspapers, which provide a broad spectrum of political opinion: the *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. These newspapers represent a wide spectrum: one is a conservative tabloid, another a conservative broadsheet and a liberal broadsheet (see: National Readership Survey 2015). Additionally, the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* are within the top four most widely read British national newspapers (National Readership Survey 2015).² Although the *Daily Mirror*, a leftist tabloid was considered for inclusion, its readership did not rank sufficiently high (see: National Readership Survey 2015). Once the author selected Aylan Kurdi as the search term and decided which newspapers to focus on, she further restricted the sample to articles published between the 2 and 10 September 2015. This time frame ensured that the sample size was manageable and included articles published online through newspaper websites and those published in print. Overall, the author analysed a total of 45 articles using a mixture of content analysis and discourse analysis: 15 from *The Guardian*, 17 from the *Daily Mail* and 13 from *The Daily Telegraph*.³

The author chose to use quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis in order to gain a holistic understanding of the text. Content analysis involves measuring the number of times certain words appear in the text alongside the coding of key themes. Discourse analysis looks beyond the sentence by focusing on broader themes and ideological discourses (Van Dijk 2002: 109-111). This is important because exploring the portrayal of Syrian refugees in the British press necessitates an understanding of the content of the texts alongside a consideration of the ideological or political motivations of the selected newspapers.

Literature Review

As Yazgan *et al.* state, the academic literature on Syrian refugees has been surprisingly limited. The majority of written works have so far comprised of reports by regional and international agencies such as *Amnesty International* and tend to focus on the practical needs of refugees such as medical aid, shelter and food as well as on the acceptance of refugees by local communities (2015: 185-186; 238-250). Although few studies have been conducted on media representations of Syrian refugees, some exceptions exist: Yaylaci and Karakus’ ‘Perceptions and newspaper coverage of Syrian refugees in Turkey’ (2015) provides a unique and interesting example of how Syrian refugees have been represented by the media in the Turkish context. Yaylaci and Karakus (2015) use content analysis of three newspapers to argue that the portrayal of Syrian refugees in the Turkish media is linked to each newspaper’s

¹ Articles sourced through LexisLibrary do not feature page numbers.

² The most widely read national newspaper is the *Daily Mail* with a readership of 18369, 000 from October 2014 to September 2015. The *Daily Mail*’s readership is followed by *The Sun* with a readership of 13417, 000, *The Guardian* and *The Observer* with 11544, 000, *The Daily Telegraph* with 11246, 000 and *The Daily Mirror* with 11180, 000 (National Readership Survey 2015).

³ In the case of *The Guardian*, the LexisLibrary News Archive yielded 62 articles for the search term; in order to stick to the average number of the two other samples, the author randomly selected 15. Although the large number of articles in *The Guardian* relating to Aylan Kurdi is in itself interesting, exploring this was not possible within the scope of the article.

political affiliation. Their article and its conclusions sit within a wider body of work, which explores the role of the media in portraying other refugee populations and minorities. This existing literature includes a number of studies, which specifically focus on the representations of refugees and asylum seekers in the British press. Much of this literature relies on Van Dijk's theory of critical discourse analysis. Van Dijk suggests the structure, syntax and context of media texts reveals their role in reproducing racist discourse. He thus highlights the political, cultural and social function of the media (1992: 95-97; 2002: 111-112; 116). Critical discourse analysis is widely used within the field of media studies and analysis, and is often largely qualitative. However, some scholars have begun to use quantitative methods such as content analysis and corpus linguistic analysis. The latter involves using software to explore natural language patterns such as the juxtaposition of words in a collection of texts. For example, Baker and McEnery (2005) practice a corpus linguistic analysis of media discourse on refugees, arguing that it provides them with a more complete understanding of the use of certain words (2005: 223). However, despite the use of different methods within the field, research on how the British press portrays migrants and refugees generally arrives at common conclusions.

Existing studies find that refugees are primarily portrayed negatively, whether as tragic victims without agency or as the dangerous 'other' who threatens British society (see e.g. Baker *et al.* 2008; Baker and McEnery 2005; KosraviNik 2010, Lamb 2014; Philo *et al.* 2013). Both KhosraviNik (2010: 1-2) and Philo *et al.* (2013: 3) stress the existence of common motifs used by British newspapers to portray refugees and migrants. These key motifs include notions of threat and economic burden (Philo *et al.* 2013: 35-42); a focus on numbers; or use of collective metaphors, such as 'flood' to refer to refugees (KhosraviNik, 2010: 1-2; 18-20). This is further supported by Baker *et al.* who use a combination of critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to argue that both research methods independently identified numerous examples of negative categories in relation to refugees and asylum seekers (2008: 287).

Many scholars also highlight how refugees are equated with economic migrants, demonstrating the British press' reluctance to distinguish between different forms of migration (see Philo *et al.* 2013: 2). Furthermore, KhosraviNik (2010), Lamb (2014), and Yaylaci and Karakus (2015) argue that the portrayal of refugees and other migrants depends on the political affiliation of the newspaper, indicating that how Syrian refugees are presented in the British press is far from objective. In addition to focusing on the content of the text, there are a number of studies, which focus on the effects of negative media representations of refugees and migrants. Philo *et al.* (2013) use interviews to highlight how media depictions of refugees have a profound impact on public opinion and action. This is supported by Esses *et al.*'s (2013) experimental study, which found that negative media coverage of immigration led participants to dehumanise refugees.

These studies thus highlight the importance of understanding how Syrian refugees are portrayed in the British press: if media portrayals have a tangible impact on the way that people think and act, then it is imperative to know how a particular group of refugees is written about in British newspapers. However, existing research has primarily focused on longitudinal trends rather than investigating how refugees may be perceived in the aftermath of particular events or in relation to other identities, such as their faith or ethnicity.

In contrast, academic scholarship, which specifically focuses on the characterisations of British Muslims and Islam in the British press, tends to acknowledge the possible dual

identity of Muslim and migrant. For example, Poole suggests that anti-Muslim sentiment is often linked to immigration in conservative newspapers (2012: 183-184). In addition, Eide *et al.* (2008) present an in-depth study of portrayals of Islam following the Mohammad Cartoons published in 2005 by Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, indicating a recognition of how specific events can affect media characterisations of Muslims and minorities. Despite this, the majority of scholars within this field avoid focusing on specific events, instead choosing to use Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* (2003) in order to explore depictions of Muslims in the British press more broadly. These scholars tend to argue that the British press present Muslims in orientalist fashion as the violent, irrational and despotic 'other' against the free, rational and liberal West. For example, Elgamri argues that Islam and Islamic militancy are frequently associated in the British press, creating a concept of a violent Islam, which is a threat to the West and its 'liberal values' (2008: xii; 31). Similarly, Amin-Khan focuses on the 'clash of civilisations' narrative, which presents Islam and the West as incommensurable by arguing that Muslims, migrants and refugees are being increasingly racialised by the press and government in Britain (2012: 1602). In addition, like Elgamri (2008), Amin-Khan asserts that the diverse range of Muslim communities are being homogenised and presented as a security threat by the Western media (Amin-Khan 2012: 1598). Khiabany and Williamson also explore the presence of this narrative in the Western media, asserting that the British tabloid *The Sun* portrays the veiled Muslim woman as a symbol of the Muslim threat to Western liberty and rights (2008: 83). They further suggest that this constitutes the attack of the powerful, the media and politicians, on the vulnerable Muslim minority (Khiabany and Williamson 2008: 86).

However, Baker challenges suggestions that negative characterisations of Muslims in the British press are necessarily linked to the orientalist attitudes of journalists and politicians by asserting they may also be due to the media's tendency to focus on the shocking and dramatic (2010: 333). Baker also highlights the divergences between different newspapers' portrayals of Muslims and Islam, arguing that broadsheets tend to make fewer connections between terrorism and Muslims than tabloids (2010: 332). This indicates the need to compare how different newspapers identify and describe certain groups in order to gain a holistic and nuanced picture. It also highlights the importance of considering the media's commercial nature when analysing its presentation of events or groups. Despite acknowledging these necessary considerations, Baker (2010), like those previously discussed, also asserts that British newspapers typically present Muslims as being 'other' through constructing them as an outsider group who are threat to Britain. This presentation of the Muslim as the 'other', suggests similarities with the way that refugees and asylum seekers are portrayed. However, despite extensive literature on both subjects there has been no in-depth attempt to examine what occurs when the concepts of refugee and Muslim are brought together. This study offers an opportunity to bridge this gap and point to necessary future research.

Analysis and Discussion

Syria is a country with a Muslim majority; one can therefore assume that with such large population movements many of the refugees are Muslim. However, they are not primarily presented in this way by the British press. The most common descriptors used in the newspapers analysed were 'refugee', 'Syrian', and 'migrant', which appear a total of 397, 173, 147 times, respectively, across the examined articles.⁴ In contrast, the term 'Muslim' is only mentioned eight times.⁵

⁴ See Table 1 for a full breakdown of quantitative content analysis results.

⁵ See Table 1.

Both the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* comment on Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban's statement that the Christian culture of Europe must be protected from Muslim migrants; however, this is used to criticise Orban's racism rather than to focus on the religious identity of refugees (Hardman 2015; Traynor 2015). Where newspapers mention the refugees' religion and culture, they do it in one of two ways: *The Guardian*, as a liberal newspaper, infers the refugees' religion through indicating that Islamophobia plays a role in some people's reluctance to welcome Syrian refugees to their country (Al-Jijakli 2015; Issa 2015). In contrast, the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*, both conservative newspapers, remark on the refugees' religion by implying that Syrian refugees are culturally different from the British people. In *The Daily Telegraph* we see this through an article, which criticises Middle Eastern countries for failing to take in any of their 'brethren', dismissing the cultural and political differences in the Middle East and instead portraying Syrians as a cultural 'other' to British society and values (Pearson 2015). In the *Daily Mail*, this sentiment is more frequent and explicit. Three articles argue that Syrian refugees have a different culture, which may damage British 'values' (Hastings 2015; Littlejohn 2015; McKay 2015). This includes one article, which highlights that some groups in Britain believe that, if Syrian refugees are allowed to settle within the United Kingdom, they may become the 'next generation of jihadists' (McKay 2015). Although it is clear that conservative newspapers are more likely to display orientalist attitudes by emphasising a potential clash of cultures between Syrian refugees and British citizens (see: Amin-Khan 2012; Khiabany and Williamson 2008), this is relatively rare, with only eight articles out of the 45 analysed referencing Syrian refugees' cultural or religious difference.

In contrast, 21 articles reference 'Islamic State' or 'ISIS'⁶, suggesting that Islam is primarily presented in terms of conflict and violence. The articles juxtapose Islamic State with Syrian refugees through the use of terms such as 'barbaric' and 'brutal theocracy'. These are in contrast to a characterisation of refugees as 'innocent men, women and children' and 'tragic victims' fleeing from violence (Daily Mail 2015; Dominiczak *et al.* 2015a; Hastings 2015; The Guardian 2015). The newspapers analysed present Islamic State as the primary reason why Syrians are fleeing their country with only six articles proposing that Syrian refugees may be fleeing as a result of Assad's brutality.⁷ This is despite the fact that The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic established by the Human Rights Council made a number of statements in 2015 relating to human rights abuses, such as indiscriminate bombings, perpetrated by Syrian government forces (OHCHR 2016).⁸ This focus on Islamic State evidences that, as Elgarmi argues, Islam is primarily associated with Islamic militancy, and therefore violence, in the British press (2008: 39). It is also apparent that refugees are primarily portrayed as innocent victims rather than as moderate Muslims in opposition to violence; in fact, their Muslim identity is largely ignored. This denotes the tendency of the British press to present a homogeneous Islam stripped of its internal diversities and debates, through the failure of identifying Syrian refugees as Muslims who oppose the violence and values of Islamic State.

⁶ Although I also searched the term ISIL, newspapers were not utilizing this term within this time frame, writing either IS, Islamic State or ISIS. Thus ISIL is not included in my study.

⁷ Four of these articles were found in *The Guardian*, one in *The Telegraph* and one in the *Daily Mail* indicating that there are differences in these newspapers' coverage and content.

⁸ The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic was established by the UN Human Rights Council in August 2011. The Commission has a mandate to investigate 'all alleged violations of international human rights law in the Syrian Arab Republic' since March 2011 (UNHRC 2016).

Instead, the conservative British press largely identifies Syrian refugees as migrants. This is achieved through the use of specific language and the placement of Syrian refugees within wider debates about the European Union (EU) and migration. Both the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* use the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ interchangeably. This is more prevalent in the *Daily Mail* but, nonetheless, the two newspapers infer that the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ are synonymous. *The Daily Mail* refers to the ‘refugee crisis’ and the ‘migrant crisis’ as well as identifying Syrian refugees as ‘Syrian migrants’ (Littlejohn 2015; Platell 2015). Similarly, in *The Daily Telegraph*, one article uses the terms ‘refugee quotas’ and ‘quotas of migrants’ (Dominiczak *et al.* 2015a), while another states that Britain will take more ‘asylum seekers’ to ease the ‘migrant crisis’ (Dominiczak *et al.* 2015b). A third speaks of the ‘refugee emergency’ becoming a ‘migration crisis’ for Europe (Daily Telegraph 2015). Both papers also identify refugees as migrants by placing them within the existing discourse of migration. The *Daily Mail* uses terms such as ‘tidal wave’ (Littlejohn 2015), ‘surge’ (Hastings 2015) and ‘human tide’ (Powell 2015) while the *Daily Telegraph* frequently represents the refugees with quantifiers, such as ‘thousands’ (Hardman 2015).⁹ This language indicates the use of numbers and collective metaphor - which KhosraviNik argues is a typical facet of the representation of migrants in the British press (2010: 15). This suggests that both the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* are placing Syrian refugees within an existing discourse of migration and, in doing so, dehumanising them by characterising them as a single, agentless group (see Baker *et al.* 2008: 287).

Furthermore, the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* place Syrian refugees within existing debates about migration and Britain’s place in Europe. For example, 11 out of the 17 *Daily Mail* articles analysed used Syrian refugee movement to either criticise the EU or comment on uncontrolled economic migration. Articles such as ‘The Pity Is, We Can’t Help Them All’ (Hastings 2015) exemplify the link made between refugees and debates about the EU and migration: the article speaks of ‘waves’ of refugees and migrants sweeping through the EU’s ‘skimpy border controls’ while European leaders fail to make a decision about what to do. Similarly, Walters and Owen (2015) state that, although British people are sympathetic to Syrian refugees, the majority are opposed to allowing large numbers of refugees to enter the country and are likely to vote to leave the EU to prevent this from happening. Glover (2015) and Pearson (2015) also argue that Britain cannot accept thousands of refugees due to pre-existing pressures on public services caused by EU immigration. *The Daily Telegraph* also associates Syrian refugees with economic migrants and situates them within the debate about Britain’s place in the EU albeit to a lesser extent than the *Daily Mail* does. Although the newspaper generally opposes accepting more refugees and EU refugee quotas, it does so on the basis that it will encourage human trafficking across the Mediterranean rather than focusing on the existing strain placed on public services by EU immigration (Nelson 2015; The Daily Telegraph 2015). Furthermore, only six of *The Daily Telegraph* articles analysed discussed the role of Europe and the EU in relation to Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, these articles frequently mention ‘Schengen’¹⁰, ‘Europe’ and ‘borders’.¹¹ A number of articles also criticise the EU’s freedom of movement and Germany’s attempts to impose a refugee quota system. These critical voices include Pearson (2015), who argues that Britain could take more asylum seekers if EU immigrants did not burden it. This is further exemplified by some articles’ comments on an overbearing EU through the use of terms such as ‘impose’ and

⁹ See Table 1 for use of “thousands” by the three newspapers analysed.

¹⁰ ‘Schengen’ refers to the Schengen zone, a border-free area within Europe that allows for the movement of EU citizens or others legally present on EU territory without border checks. The UK is not part of the Schengen Area.

¹¹ See Table 1.

‘insist’ (Dominiczak 2015b; The Daily Telegraph 2015). Placing refugees within debates about the EU, as well as the use of labelling and certain motifs, indicates that both newspapers primarily choose to portray Syrian refugees through the existing discourse of migration rather than as Muslims.

The liberal newspaper, *The Guardian*, also primarily portrays Syrian refugees within a discourse of migration. However, in contrast to the other newspapers, it typically labels Syrian refugees as ‘refugees’ rather than using the term ‘migrant’. It also actively makes distinctions between refugees and economic migrants in three articles by emphasising the fact that they are fleeing from conflict (Al-Jijakli 2015; Smith 2015; The Guardian 2015b). Nevertheless, the terms ‘wave of migration’ (Deveney 2015) and ‘mass migration’ (Kingsley 2015) are used in two articles, signifying that Syrian refugees are, to some extent, characterised through an embedded vocabulary of migration. It also implies that terms such as ‘wave’ and ‘mass’ have become implicitly associated with migrants and refugees, even in newspapers, which generally present these groups in positive terms. In addition, while *The Guardian* predominantly uses the term refugee rather than migrant when writing about Syrians fleeing from conflict, it continues to associate them with debates about migration and the EU. This is evident in seven out of the 15 articles analysed.

However, in contrast to the conservative newspapers, *The Guardian* articles largely view EU policy favourably, while criticising the British Prime Minister’s approach to Syrian refugees. For example, one article urges David Cameron to accept EU refugee quotas (The Guardian 2015b); and another calls for the United Kingdom to take responsibility for Syrian and other refugees from the Middle East since they are the result of the country’s foreign policy and military interventions in the region (Issa 2015). In addition, the newspaper’s content explicitly recognises the links between debates about Britain’s strategy in relation to Syrian refugees and questions about Britain’s place in Europe. This is exemplified by Greenslade’s article, which argues that the Prime Minister’s response to Syrian refugees has been influenced by the prospective referendum on Britain’s membership in the EU (Greenslade 2015). It can also be seen in *The Guardian*’s suggestion that asylum debates have caused questions about Britain’s relationship with other European countries and the EU more widely (The Guardian 2015b). In addition to its domestic focus, *The Guardian* also places Syrian refugees within more global debates: two articles out of 15 explicitly focus on the response to Syrian refugees by politicians and individuals in Australia and the United States (Bannock 2015; Davidson 2015). Despite this wider international focus, *The Guardian*, like the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*, clearly places Syrian refugees within an existing discourse of migration. This occurs because the newspaper situated Syrian refugees within its wider positive attitude towards the EU as well as alongside existing debates about Britain’s place within the EU, such as the EU referendum.

However, there are clear differences between how *The Guardian* and the conservative newspapers depict Syrian refugees. As mentioned before, *The Guardian* takes a broader view of refugee movement by looking beyond the response of Europe; it also takes a more positive approach by referring to Syrian refugees as ‘refugees’ rather than framing them as ‘migrants’ and calling for Western governments to admit more Syrians into their countries. While the conservative tabloids are also often sympathetic to the plight of refugees, they typically place refugees within existing debates about the negative aspects of immigration.

Reactions to the Aylan Kurdi Incident

The conservative newspapers also take a different approach to *The Guardian* in their assessment of the outpouring of public sympathy towards refugees following the death of

Aylan Kurdi. Articles in *The Guardian* tend to suggest this sympathy is a positive outcome of Aylan Kurdi's death, which has stimulated human compassion and donations to charities, which support refugees and migrants (Bannock 2015; The Guardian 2015a). *The Guardian* also argues that in addition to influencing public opinion, the toddler's tragic death has caused a 'turn around' in the attitude of the 'right leaning' press to refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean (Greenslade 2015; The Guardian 2015). The *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* also highlight the tragic nature of the death of Aylan Kurdi, referring to it as 'heart wrenching' (McKay 2015) and 'harrowing' (The Daily Telegraph 2015). In addition, both newspapers feature articles, which attempt to illicit sympathy for the plight of refugees. For example, in *The Daily Telegraph*, Gordon (2015) calls for the death of Aylan Kurdi to be 'more than a moment', arguing that refugees can teach us 'bravery' and 'humility'. Similarly, in the *Daily Mail* Dockery (2015) describes the poor conditions of the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan while Hardman (2015) criticises Hungary for its racism towards migrants and refugees passing through the country on their way to Germany. However, in contrast to *The Guardian*, the majority of articles published in the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* question the worth of empathy suggesting that it hides the complexity of the situation and may lead to ill-informed decisions in relation to allowing more Syrian refugees into the country (Hastings 2015; Littlejohn 2015; McKay 2015; Pearson 2015). This approach is exemplified by McKay (2015) who declares that the death of Aylan Kurdi is an 'unreliable basis for migration policy'. Furthermore, the *Daily Mail* explicitly challenges *The Guardian's* statement that Aylan Kurdi's death has changed public opinion, arguing that recent opinion polls evidence the fact that the majority of British people still oppose Britain taking in more refugees (Glover 2015).

While *The Guardian*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* articles acknowledge the individual tragedy of Aylan Kurdi's death, they primarily represent his death and the debates created by it through pre-existing narratives of migration, related to their existing political stance on immigration and the EU as liberal and conservative newspapers. This is further confirmed by the analysis above, which suggests that all three newspapers, to differing extents, associate Syrian refugees with economic migrants through the label of 'migrants' or by using certain motifs that has been previously identified in studies of the portrayal of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in British newspapers. This indicates that although the author initially expected that the death of Aylan Kurdi would lead to a more sympathetic stance by the British press - including an emphasis on the individual stories of Syrian refugees - it is clear that this event did not significantly change the way that refugees were portrayed in the British press. In addition, despite their differing focuses and reporting styles, Syrian refugees were implicitly or explicitly associated with economic migrants by all three newspapers through their placement alongside and within larger debates about Britain's place within the EU. In fact, Syrian refugees were used as a medium through which all three newspapers displayed their pro-EU or anti-migration stance. This is seen through the *Daily Mail's* focus on the threat of migration in contrast to *The Guardian's* discussion of Syrian refugees, alongside praise of the EU and criticism of the Prime Minister. This finding supports KhosraviNik's suggestion that representations of refugees are positioned within a discourse of political rivalry, which is interlinked with discussions of party politics (2010: 15-18). It also infers that individual migration stories and the complexities of migration are only acknowledged when the newspaper is not taking part in a heated political debate which necessitates that it present its political stance (KhosraviNik 2010: 15-18). Furthermore, the characterisation of Syrian refugees as migrants, rather than as Muslims, indicates that the British press suppresses certain identities while emphasising others, depending on their larger political focus at the time. This can also be traced through the choice of associating Syrian

refugees with larger debates about migration rather than in debates concerning Middle East policy or Muslim integration specifically.

Conclusion

This article has explored how *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* present Syrian refugees in relation to the latter's religious affiliation and to wider debates about immigration. It has contributed a snap-shot study in a field that primarily focuses on longitudinal trends and has explored how refugees are depicted, following a particular event - in this case the death of Aylan Kurdi. The analysis conducted has shown common themes and characteristics used in the portrayal of Syrian refugees. It has evidenced that in September 2015, Syrian refugees were rarely identified as Muslims and were instead primarily described as innocent civilians whose religion was not specified. This suggests that the British press at times perceives religious identity as irrelevant in their portrayal of refugees and migrants, preferring to instead focus on other aspects or identities. Rather than presenting Syrian refugees as moderate Muslims in opposition to the violence of Islamic State, Syrian refugees' religion is largely overlooked.

By ignoring Syrian refugees' religion, while suggesting that Islamic State is the reason that many are fleeing Syria, Islam is therefore implicitly associated with terrorism rather than with the refugees themselves. These findings support those scholars who have argued that Islam is almost exclusively characterised as violent by the British press that fails to recognise the diversity of its interpretation and practice (see Elgamri 2008). However, although the British press has avoided using negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam in its discussion of Syrian refugees, it clearly places them within the largely negative existing discourse of migration. Despite the death of Aylan Kurdi eliciting sympathy from all three newspapers for the child and his family, there has been little change in how the British press portrays Syrian refugees. Although there are differences in the extent to which the *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* use language deployed to describe RASM in the British press (See KhosraviNik 2010; Philo *et al* 2013), all three newspapers place Syrian refugees within existing debates about immigration and the EU. In fact, Syrian refugees appear to be utilised by the *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* to present their stance on the EU. This indicates that rather than Syrian refugees being depicted in relation to their perceived religion or cultural attributes they are integrated into an existing discourse of migration, which associates them with the characteristics of economic migrants and places them within on-going political debates.

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Table 1: Results Of Quantitative Content Analysis: Occurrences Of Key Words

<i>Word</i>	<i>Number of occurrences-Daily Mail</i>	<i>Average frequency of word per article</i>	<i>Number of occurrences – The Daily Telegraph</i>	<i>Average frequency of word per article</i>	<i>Number of occurrences-The Guardian</i>	<i>Average frequency of word per article</i>	<i>Total number of occurrences</i>
asylum seeker/asylum-seeker	3	0.2	16	1.2	4	0.3	23
Aylan	37	2.2	23	1.5	24	1.8	84
borders	5	0.3	13	1.0	7	0.5	25
Christian	3	0.2	0	0.0	7	0.5	10
children	31	1.8	32	2.5	21	1.4	84
EU/European/Europe	93	5.5	104	8.0	100	6.7	297
flee	21	1.2	11	0.8	4	0.3	36
free movement	0	0.0	5	0.4	2	0.1	7
Germany	14	0.8	20	1.5	19	1.3	53
immigrant(s)	5	0.3	3	0.2	5	0.3	13
migrant(s)	65	3.8	66	5.1	16	1.1	147
Muslim(s)	3	0.1	1	0.1	4	0.3	8
refugee(s)	96	5.6	123	9.5	178	11.9	397
Schengen	1	0.1	14	1.1	5	0.3	20
Syrian(s)	53	3.1	65	5.0	55	3.7	173
Thousands	16	0.9	28	2.2	23	1.5	67
West/Western (as descriptor not geographic)	5	0.3	0	0.0	5	0.3	10

NOTE: To find the average frequency of words per article the number of occurrences was divided by the total number of articles analysed for each newspaper. For example, to find the average frequency for the word ‘migrant’ in the *Daily Mail* articles analysed 65 was divided by 17. The answer was then rounded to the nearest decimal point.

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